

TOWARD A CONSTRUCT THEORY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERARY CRITICISM

Cintra Whitehead

Ocala, Florida

Psychological literary criticism goes back at least as far as Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, for both of those philosophers concerned themselves with the psychological effects of drama on society. Plato was unwilling to accept dramatists into his ideal state because he saw them as eulogists of tyranny and feared that their works would corrupt the citizenry; he also found *mimesis* – that filtering of reality through the creative artist in the form of imitation, with its distancing of the perception of reality to the third remove, and its appeal to emotion rather than reason – an unsatisfactory substitute for confrontation with reality itself. Aristotle, although he concentrated on form and diction and other frankly technical aspects of the dramas he discussed, concerned himself as well with the audience's emotional reaction to drama and invented the doctrine of *catharsis* in an attempt to account for civilized people's enjoyment of tragedy through a purging of the emotions of pity and fear rather than through a propensity to revel in the misfortunes of others.

Although literary criticism has dealt with psychological issues from the time of Plato and Aristotle, it was not until the twentieth-century that critics began to talk of a specific sub-discipline called psychological literary criticism. It would have been more accurate in most cases to call it psychoanalytic criticism, for Freudian and neo-Freudian theory has dominated the field, although, there has been a fair amount of criticism written from a Jungian point of view, and recently a few critics have adopted some of the views of the better known Third Force theorists. To this day¹, however, I have met only one critic who has even heard of George Kelly's Theory of Personal Constructs, and he has never used it in his criticism. Because I believe that construct theory has more to offer psychological literary

criticism than any other personality theory, I have set about fashioning a *Construct Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism*.

Before I could come to a construct theory, I realized that a *general theory* of psychological literary criticism was badly needed, and I determined to create such a theory. Impossible as it is to summarize in a brief paragraph the general theory – to say nothing of the particular theories which individual personality theories generate under its aegis – I will nevertheless try to state its essentials: I assume that personality theory is the branch of psychology most relevant to literary criticism, and furthermore I assume that *all* of the approximately two dozen personality theories developed to date are germane to the discussion of psychological literary criticism. I assume that every person has a personality theory – i.e., a theory about how people are alike and how they are different; why they react to each other, to societal and environmental pressures and to the universe as they do. The personality theory of the man- or woman-on-the-street will be informal and implicit compared to the formal explicit theories of professional personality theorists, but the informal, implicit personality theory of the lay person will agree more or less with one of the formal explicit personality theories or types of theories developed by experts in the field. I propose that it is the job of the psychological literary critic to understand an author's implicit, informal personality theory and view that author's works through the formal theory – or at least the type of theory – with which it is most congruent. And since each personality theory will give rise to its own idiosyncratic theory of literature and criticism, I propose that the psychological literary critic must be able to deal with theoretical issues from the strength of a thorough grounding in personality theory and philosophy of science for personality theory.

¹ 1983 (*Editors' note*)

Authors whose implicit informal personality theories are similar to George Kelly's Theory of Personal Constructs form an impressive list which begins with Shakespeare and includes (but is not limited to) Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad and such contemporary writers as James Dickey and John Fowles. Unfortunately we do not presently have time to develop a construct view of any of these authors but must concern ourselves with the outline of a construct theory of criticism. We will find that we are dealing with some of the same concerns addressed by Plato and Aristotle as well as others that have concerned literary criticism since the days of classical Greece.

The author: We might begin our examination of construct theory by looking at the author. The construct theorist would see the literary artist as one member of the class man-the-scientist with the universal need to construe reality, and predict and control the events of his life. The author would be a person who has a well developed, subtle, highly elaborated construct system and would be more able than most people to state both poles of his verbal constructs. Compared to the average person, the literary artist would have brought more of his constructs to the verbal level, while, at the same time, he would experience a rich store of nonverbal and preverbal constructs which would be working toward articulation through imagistic expression. The literary artist would be adept at dealing with nonverbal and preverbal constructs through exceptionally pungent images utilizing various figures of speech, arrangement of events (plot), subtlety of characterization, and structure in his literary creations. Literary art would not be so much an imitation of life – *mimesis* as Plato called it – as a representation or interpretation – a figuring forth – of reality.

The author would be seen as a teacher; not in the narrow pedantic sense of one who teaches facts or morals, but as one who wishes to share his constructs with readers and invites readers to extend and enrich their construct systems. The author would teach first by representing close approximations of reality. As Plato noted, the artist would work at the third remove from 'reality,' but being at the third remove would not invalidate the artist's work, for the construct theorist would see that the qualities that make an

artist include his ability to construe and represent reality more accurately than the average person, so that he may help readers to rectify discrepancies in their own representations of reality.

In contrast to psychoanalytic criticism which has had to resort to the rather cumbersome idea of 'regression in service to the ego' in order to explain the author's or other artist's ability to reach into 'The Unconscious,' construct theory can explain and investigate these phenomena much more directly and economically without suggesting that the artist must somehow set aside 'ego control' in order to reach and use material at 'primitive levels.' In Kellyan construct theory, nonverbal and preverbal constructs are part of every person's system, and, although they are fascinating, they are not at all mysterious; certainly they are not manifestations of 'neurosis' or of a dark and threatening 'id'. Nonverbal and preverbal constructs constitute the natural human 'unconscious' in Kellyan construct theory. Literary critics who have accepted the psychoanalytic propaganda that any theory which does not deal with 'The Unconscious' is impoverished, need to be reminded that it is illogical to judge any theory from inside the framework of another. They need to be reminded that many theories do not make 'The Unconscious' a part of their system. In Kelly's writings the word *unconscious* is often enclosed in quotation marks and should always be understood as if it were. For Kelly, 'the unconscious' is 'a notion' – a term which is used because "we must use many imprecise unscientific words in public discourse, in an illustrative rather than in a definitive sense." (Kelly 1955, p. 466)

The literary artist is adept at communicating nonverbal and preverbal constructs through various literary techniques of which imagery is the most important. Through imagery, the author accomplishes the paradoxical feat of saying in words that which cannot be directly explained or expressed verbally. All of us surely have had the experience of encountering in dreams figures which symbolize whole complexes of emotions, and constructions replete with emotional significance, and know the difficulty of putting the dream into words. Perhaps some of these dream images arise from our childhood when we had to construe that which we had no words to verbalize. Thus, *mother* or *father*, for instance, may become a symbol for a multitude of constructs

having to do with nurturing, dependency, love and, in some cases, unfortunately, with abuse, hate, chastisement, rejection, and guilt. No wonder that when this mother or father figure appears in a dream the dreamer may have difficulty in articulating the dream.

We can see a stage between the imagistic preverbal and nonverbal content of dreams and the verbal and imagistic content of literature in the art form called *mime*. Just as when we try to verbalize our dreams, we are at a loss to put into words *exactly* what is happening in mime. It is much easier to *feel* the frustrating restriction of Marcel Marceau's "Wall" or the panic engendered by "The Mask" which refuses to be removed from the experimenter's once merry face than to bind those experiences in words. We have in mime, then, an artistic experience very near the natural experience of the nonverbal and preverbal construing of dreams. Once the construct critic has realized how difficult it is to express what we experience in dreams or what we encounter while watching mime, he will develop an immense respect for the author who takes us into the artistically and psychologically complex art forms of fiction, poetry and drama.

Since the construct theorist will believe that we all construe at the preverbal "unconscious" level of (sometimes) bizarre and esoteric personal symbolism, the construct theorist is much less likely than his psychoanalytic colleague to single out the author from his fellow humans and construe him as 'neurotic.' In fact the author who through his art can help us elaborate our construct systems at the preverbal level and then help us bring those constructs to articulation would be seen as a valuable citizen in any ideal – or real – society.

A construct view of the literary artist, then, would reject the idea that the author's motivation to work is a cathartic expression of his neuroses. Nor would the construct theorist see the author as one whose work arises either from *divine madness* imposed upon the artist or from a passive inborn creative intuition within the artist, for the artist does not so much intuit or apprehend the 'divine forms of reality' as make them up or *construct* or *construe* them as he goes along. The artistic process is an active creative one.

We can also see that the author or other artist would have much less to fear from construct psychotherapy than from other types of therapy,

for construct therapy with its theoretically derived respect for the artist would attempt to help the author elaborate his construct system and individuate himself rather than attempt to make him 'adjust,' by seeing reality as everyone else sees it – thus taking from him what has often been perceived by other types of therapy as his 'gift' of neurosis.

Perhaps if I were to search for a parallel statement of the nature of the artist by an author, I could come no closer than the symbolist theory of William Butler Yeats. Certainly for George Kelly, as for Yeats, words are symbols through which man searches for knowledge. That search must be personal and must bear the stamp of the author's construct system. In a sense, the work and the author are inseparable, and 'negative capability' – the disappearance of the artist from his work – an impossibility (though he need not write disguised autobiography), for no author can understand or communicate except through his construct system. Perhaps Yeats said it best for us in the last line of "Among Schoolchildren," "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" It seems we have in a construct theory of literature an unexpected marriage of 20th-century science with a symbolist theory of literature which will view the author as a scientist, a seeker, teacher, and singer.

The critic/teacher: The construct theorist would expect a great deal from the critic/teacher, for he would be expected to act as a catalyst whose job it is to help readers and students subsume the construct system of the author as it is revealed in his work through literary devices. Since no person can comprehend, teach, or criticize beyond his own construct system, the person who calls himself a literary critic would be obligated to seek the widest and deepest possible knowledge of the real world as well as of literature and criticism. If he is to be a psychological literary critic it is not enough to stop at an even rather sophisticated knowledge of psychoanalytic theory or any other *one* theory, for the construct theorist would be all too aware that if the critic's construct system contains nothing, for instance, but Oedipal complexes and phallic symbols, that is precisely what the critic will perceive in any literary work.

The construct theorist would recognize, of course, the fact that no one – not even a literary

critic – can be expected to be omniscient, and would expect the literary critic to be aware that he is not. At the same time, the critic can comfort himself with the knowledge that he may be able to teach others what he does not “know” himself, simply by putting them in a situation in which they must construe an author’s work for themselves. The learner will learn what his construct system permits him to see or abstract from the work. The critic/teacher may offer constructs to the student or reader but cannot be sure that he will be willing or able to accept them into his construct system. Although no one can construe beyond his construct system, that system is more or less permeable and malleable. That is, as Kelly states in his *Modulation Corollary*, the individual can add new constructs and reorder older ones, and so can vary and improve his construct system. A danger exists in any teacher-learner relationship when the critic or teacher attempts to limit the student’s or reader’s construct system. Fortunately the tendency of each person to make elaborative choices would seem to lead eventually to the dissolution of this kind of arrangement. Thus, out of the strictest training in orthodoxy of any kind, even that of psychoanalytic literary criticism, the construct theorist would expect to see, from time to time, some creative diversity and innovation.

The work – its origin, purpose and ontology: The origin of the literary work for the construct theorist lies in the construct system of its author. It is an attempt to communicate that system, or a part of it chosen by the author, to other persons so that it may be shared and acted upon by them. The author’s purposes in trying to communicate his construct system to others may be as complex as that system itself but will always include the author’s attempt to bring the reader to construe reality as the author does.

The author’s work will reflect his construct system in the use of plot, character, figurative language, and all other artistic devices he chooses to use. Form and content will be inextricably intertwined through plot, character and style. The plot will extend through enough imaginary time to allow replications of events which characters (and readers or viewers) must construe, and from which they must abstract similarities and differences and then make predictions about future events. Characters may be “naturalistic” –

i. e. representations of real people whom the author has observed –, or they may be composite sketches of a perceived type of person, or they may be embodiments of one pole or another of a construct. For the construct theorist, structure is not merely an empty container to be filled, but clearly is a predictive tool. Reader and audience anticipate events to a great extent on the basis of their familiarity with the art form in question, and the author or other artist can manipulate our predictions through the use of structure as well as through other artistic devices.

The question of ontology of a literary work has been one of the most difficult for critics to deal with. Just how and where does the literary work exist? Construct theory may not have an answer to every possible question regarding the ontology of a literary work, but could certainly offer some hypotheses. The author should know, for instance, that the most he can hope for is that others will approximate his views of the events and characters offered them in his work. The construct theorist would see that as the work emerges under the author’s hand, it exists in its original state, even for the author himself, only so long as his own construct system remains unchanged. Since the author’s construct system may change precisely as a result of writing the work and inevitably *will* change through time, the work’s existence in its original state even in the mind of its creator is ephemeral, and is not captured in published print, for there it is subject to the author’s reconstruing and to the construing of readers, reviewers, and critics, each of whom can view it only through his/her own construct system. One may argue that the work exists in the words – the pattern of ink on paper – but the construct theorist would answer that it does not truly exist until those words, as they make a whole, are construed by someone. The ontology of the work, then, for the construct theorist lies in its refraction through the lens of a reader’s or viewer’s construct system to a different plane of existence where it may bear little resemblance to the original work as constructed and construed by the author.

Construct literary and critical theory: Kellyan construct theory is an extremely useful position to hold if one wishes to indulge in metatheory. Because Kellyan construct theory is a ‘process’ theory rather than a ‘content’ theory, if it is su-

perimposed upon the work of an author who holds a different type of theory it will do less damage than many other theories might. The construct theorist will not feel obliged to disprove, for instance, a Freudian or Adlerian view of a work, but can subsume those interpretations as tentative constructs while he forms his own hypotheses about the work. It is a very powerful theory, because it can operate at the very high level of abstraction of *how* people think as well as at the very concrete level of *what* people construe to be reality. It is impossible for the psychoanalytic ‘believer’ to escape the *content* of psychoanalysis – the importance of sexuality, the Oedipal conflict, and the neurophysiological developmental stages – to get to pure process, since in Freudian theory the process is dictated by the material biological sexual nature of the person in conflict with society. On the other hand, the Kellyan construct theorist can envision an individual who construes reality in those psychoanalytic terms if he wishes, but insists that he or another might choose other ways of construing the same reality. While other critics of “content” theoretical persuasions are limited to scanning an author’s works for real or imagined coincidences of content, Kellyan construct theory, although it can deal with content – i.e., with the constructs the author holds or allows his characters to hold – is also able to deal with *how* the author thinks, feels, intuitively, and expresses his constructs through artistic techniques.

Tragedy and comedy: Construct theory can offer innovative views of many critical issues, but perhaps none translate quite so neatly from their classical terms to construct terms as do tragedy and comedy. While other theories must deal with tragedy and comedy as two distinct, often seemingly unrelated, genres, construct theory will see tragedy and comedy as opposite poles of a single construct. The assumptions which underlie the poles, however, will differ, for tragedy is built on the assumption that reality is ultimately unknowable. The tragic hero, like all of us, faces inscrutable reality and struggles to construe, predict and control. *Hamartia*, the tragic flaw, would be, in a construct view, the universal failing of all humans – our inability to attain omniscience. The tragic hero is not to blame for his failure to predict and control, and we will sympathize with his struggles because we share them. But beyond

the universal *hamartia*, the individual hero may be burdened by *hubris*.

We have come to another set of critical terms that falls naturally into a Kellyan bipolar construct – i.e., *hubris* vs. *sophrosyne*. *Hubris* has often been mistranslated as *pride*, but it has more to do with an arrogant disregard of the rights of others.² In Kellyan terms, *hubris* often turns out to be *hostility* as Kelly defined it, i.e., “... the continued effort to extort validation evidence in favor of a type of social prediction which has already proved itself a failure.” (Kelly 1955, p. 510). *Sophrosyne*, on the other hand, is *prudence*, which a construct theorist might define as the ability or tendency to act in a manner which maximizes the possibility of construing reality with a high degree of accuracy, predicting and controlling.

To begin *in medias res* – in the middle of things – as Aristotle recommended, is to begin the tragedy with a blow to the tragic hero’s construct system. Often the blow is in the form of a prediction as in *Oedipus Rex*, *Macbeth*, and *Julius Caesar*; sometimes it is in the form of a ‘post’diction as in *Hamlet*, but the action of the plot is always the attempt of the hero to restructure his construct system. Through dramatic irony the playwright allows the audience to construe and predict with greater accuracy than the tragic hero. We enjoy tragedy, then, not because we experience a purging of pity and fear but because we are elated at our success in representing reality better than the hero and because we feel we have elaborated our own system.

Comedy, on the other hand, assumes that not only is reality ultimately knowable; it is immediately knowable, and not to know it makes the comic character ridiculous and the fitting butt of laughter. We need not set aside our superordinate construct which supposes that reality is unknowable, for comedy does not deal with cosmic, universal, profound reality but with a temporary, superficial, social reality.

Although theories of comedy have disagreed widely about the nature of comedy, five comic elements have generally been recognized: unexpectedness or incongruity, aggression, a sense of superiority, inconsequentiality of events, and a

² For a thorough discussion of *hubris* as well as other critical concepts, see Kaufmann (1969, p. 1-86).

pitting of the young or new against the old. We are clearly on home ground with the issue of unexpectedness, for construct theory deals with anticipation and prediction. When we look at all the elements together, we can propose a construct definition of what is comic – and what is not – which will state that unexpected and incongruous events which force us to reconstrue and perhaps elaborate our construct systems are often construed as funny and arouse laughter *if they do not threaten our core role*.

Comedy is often a social corrective, precisely because it can lead us to look at our foibles without threatening our basic construction of ourselves. The new, represented by the attractive, young, or sympathetic character, leads us to identify with the innovative and scorn the conservative. I am describing practice, of course, and not necessity, for comedy could cut the other way as well.

The construct theorist might predict on the basis of his construing of tragedy and comedy, that tragedy will wear better than comedy, since cosmic reality does not change, nor does man – in spite of his technical progress – become omniscient, so that we still are deeply moved by *Oedipus Rex*, *Medea*, and *Antigone*; while the social realities represented in comedy change so rapidly that *All in the Family* already seems dated to us; we have to try very hard to see what is funny about *You can't take it with you*; and it takes pages of disquisition to inform us what was

once funny in Aristophanes' *The Birds* or *The Wasps*.

Many other hypotheses might be derived from a construct theory of psychological literary criticism and subjected to test. I can only hope that interest in the interdisciplinary possibilities of construct theory and literary criticism will prompt further theorizing and research.

REFERENCES

- Kaufmann, W. (1969). *Tragedy and philosophy*. New York: Doubleday-Anchor.
Kelly, G. A. (1955) *The Psychology of personal constructs*, Vol. I. New York: Norton,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cintra Whitehead (1929-2015) held an interdisciplinary doctorate in psychology and English literature and has taught in both fields. For a time she was publisher and contributing editor of *Constructive Criticism: A Journal of Construct Psychology and the Arts*. Retired from teaching, she lived in Ocala, Florida as a freelance writer and lecturer, concentrating on psychological literary criticism, critical theory, and personality theory.

REFERENCE

Whitehead, C. (2016). Toward a construct theory of psychological literary criticism. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 13, 83-88

Previously unpublished paper presented at the Fifth International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, Boston, 1983.

Published: 1 March 2016