A GENERAL THEORY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERARY CRITICISM

Cintra Whitehead

Ocala, Florida, USA

Before we can talk about the application of George Kelly's Psychology of Personal Constructs or any other personality theory to literary criticism, we must consider a general theory of psychological literary criticism.

Literary critics have traditionally performed psychological literary criticism by championing one particular psychological theory and applying it to all works of all authors. The most widely recognized, indeed the almost exclusively accepted, personality theory used in psychological literary criticism has been Freudian and neo-Freudian psychoanalysis. As Freud (1956) himself did, critics have sometimes matched psychoanalytic thought to works and authors with which it is compatible, but more often they have ruthlessly superimposed psychoanalytic ideas on works that yield little but clichés to such an imposition.

I propose that the more appropriate way to pursue psychological literary criticism would be to understand an author's implicit, informal personality theory, match it to the explicit formal theory with which it is most congruent, and then use that personality theory systematically as a lens through which to view the author's work.

Although I might state my theory in many different forms, I have chosen in this article to follow roughly the format used by George Kelly (1955) in his presentation of the Psychology of Personal Constructs. This imitation of Dr. Kelly's pattern is not, I hasten to assure the reader, meant as flattery – 1 am not so presumptuous – but is simply a recognition of the clarity and convenience of that format.

ASSUMPTIONS

The following six assumptions underlie the *General Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism* which I am here creating:

1. Personality theory is the branch of psychology most relevant to psychological literary criticism.

2. All personality theories are relevant to literary criticism.

3. All people – not just those who author and publish formal explicit theories – have personality theories; i.e., theories about how people are alike and how they are different, and why they interact with each other, society, and the universe as they do.

4. The informal implicit theory of an author, critic, or reader will more or less match one of the formal, explicit theories already developed by personality theorists.

5. In order to engage intelligently in psychological literary criticism, the psychological literary critic must have an extensive knowledge not only of the twenty or more formal personality theories included in college texts on the subject but also of the philosophy of science and history of ideas as these are related to the theories. The reader who would understand psychological literary criticism needs a general acquaintance with the same topics, although perhaps not the extensive or detailed knowledge of the critic.

6. Because the personality theory which the individual holds is both the most comprehensive and the most specific theory in his/her repertory, other theories (personal theories of time, history, religion, justice, etc.) will proceed from and be informed by it.

CARDINAL POSTULATE

Built upon these assumptions is the Cardinal Postulate of the *General Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism*:

The personality theory which an author, critic, or reader holds will find expression in his/her respective creation, interpretation, or construing of a literary work and will affect and indeed determine the author's, critic's, or reader's theory of literature and such literary concepts as tragedy and comedy as well as his/her theory of criticism.

COROLLARIES

Following from the *Cardinal Postulate* are the following *eight corollaries***:**

1. An author's personal, informal, implicit personality theory will find expression in a literary work through the author's manipulation of theme, plot, character, figurative language, style, and choice of genre in which to work.

2. A psychological literary critic's personal, informal, implicit personality theory will find expression in his/her ability – or inability – to recognize and communicate the author's personality theory as expressed in the literary work. If the critic is knowledgeable enough, he/she will be able to match the author's personality theory to one of the formal, explicit theories or types of theories and will be able to recognize any contradictions in the author's system. If the psychological literary critic is familiar with only one or two personality theories, he/she will attempt to superimpose those theories on the author and his/her work, making the author conform to the Procrustean bed of the critic's personal theory and/or the formal theory the critic chooses to superimpose upon the author's *work*.

3. A reader untrained in literary criticism or personality theory will perceive a literary work or criticism of that work through his own informal, implicit personality theory. To the extent that his/her theory matches that of the au-

thor as expressed in the work, or to the extent that he/she is able to stretch his/her own personal theory to accommodate the author's theory, he/she will 'like' the work. The reader will respond favorably to criticism that broadens his/her view of the work by agreeing with or extending his/her personality theory but will probably reject criticism that originates from a personality theory that is alien both to his own and that of the author.

4. Definitions of and appreciations of tragedy and comedy will differ for each personality theory or type of theory according to each personality theory's philosophical assumptions and conclusions about causation, determinism, chance, volition, realism/idealism, dualism/monism, epistemology, and other issues which may be important to particular theories.

5. Whether tragedy, epic, or another genre is seen as the highest form of literature will depend on the individual's theoretical view of the issues listed in Corollary 4.

6. Because no theory can be proven or disproven *in toto*, an author, critic, or reader (like a scientific theorist) often chooses a theory on an aesthetic basis. There is a circularity in this: a theory is pleasing because it is my theory and it is my theory because it is pleasing. An author or psychological literary critic who chooses a theory on an aesthetic basis needs to understand the appeal the theory holds for him/her in some detail and must therefore closely examine assumptions, conclusions, and especially the rewards or pay-offs for holding that theory. Unfortunately the pay-offs may be such economically important but intellectually trivial considerations as being thought 'avant-garde' or being profitably accepted by a school or movement.

7. A psychological literary critic's training may actually limit his/her knowledge of personality theories to one particular theory (as is the case in academic programs that champion psychoanalysis as the *only* psychology relevant to literary criticism). The critic will then try to use the one theory which he/she 'knows' even though it does not accord with

his/her own informal implicit personality theory. The critic in such a case may suffer confusion and attempt to conquer it by exercising one or more of the following options: He/she may resort to applying formulas (i.e., all mother/father/son relationships must be interpreted as – and only as – oedipal conflicts; all vaguely elongated objects must be phallic symbols, while all concave objects must be vaginal symbols. Or the critic may accuse the author of being 'neurotic' or 'schizoid' (split) because the *author* has failed to match the theory the critic thrusts an him/her after the fact of literary creation. Or the critic may search for another theory to add to his/her arsenal and may enthusiastically accept a theory whose assumptions and conclusions are totally incompatible with those of the first.

8. Eclecticism in the use of two or more theories simultaneously will be appropriate only when the theories chosen share philosophical assumptions. It would be useless, for instance, to try to use both Freud's and Adler's theories at the same time for they would simply cancel each other. However, one might use the theories of Alfred Adler and George Kelly together to great advantage and might pair Kelly with Maslow or Rogers without descending to absurdity so long as one recognizes the difference in their theories at the same time that one recognizes the similarities in their assumptive systems.

And now, with this *General Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism* in mind, we can turn to an examination of construct psychology and the particular theory of psychological literary criticism that will arise from viewing literature through Kelly's *Psychology of Personal Constructs*.

REFERENCES

Freud, S. (1956). *Delusion and dream and other essays.* Ed. Philip Rieff. Boston: The Beacon Press.
Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs.* 2 Vols. New York: W.W. 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.