A Psychoanalytic Critique of Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*

Psychoanalysis became a popular school of literary theory and criticism thanks largely in part to the work done by theorists Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis is defined as “the application of specific psychological principles to the study of literature”, focusing primarily on “the writer’s psyche, the study of the creative process, the study of psychological types and principles present within works of literature, or the effects of literature upon its readers” (Siegel). Throughout my essay, I will not only offer a brief explanation of both Freud and Lacan’s model of the psyche, but I will also critique author Marguerite Duras’ novel, *The Lover*, under the strictures of Psychoanalytic theory. Through a psychoanalytic critique of *The Lover*, I hope to better understand Duras’ psyche as exhibited within her prose, as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic motives that fueled her writing.

Understanding the ideas of Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan can be daunting, but the foundations of psychoanalysis as described by the two theorists can be summarized. Freud’s most notable contribution to the school of psychoanalytic theory was his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was published in 1900. Here, Freud reveals a discovery that would become the centerpiece of the new psychoanalytic school of thought: “The human mind contains a dimension that is only partially accessible to consciousness and then only through indirect means such as dreams or neurotic symptoms” (Rivkin and Ryan 389). The dreams and neurotic symptoms described by Freud are found in the unconscious, the “repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which, according to Freud, have to do with sexuality and violence” (389). The dissociated acts and dreams are a result of years of oppression, which are intentionally ignored by the conscious but prevalent in the dream-like state of the unconscious.

Kristi Siegel summarizes Freud’s model of the psyche in three foundational elements: first, the Id, the “completely unconscious part of the psyche that serves as a storehouse of our desires, wishes, and fears. The Id houses the libido, the source of psychosexual energy”; next, the Ego, “mostly to partially conscious part of the psyche that processes experiences and operates as a referee or mediator between the Id and Superego”; and thirdly, the Superego, which “operates like an internal censor encouraging moral judgments in light of social pressures”.

Contrasting Freud’s model of the psyche was Jacques Lacan’s (with whom Duras’ wrote *Etude sur l’œuvre littéraire, théatral, et cinématographique de Marguerite Duras* in 1976) (Gale) interpretation, which was also summarized in three foundational elements by Siegel. First, she describes the Imaginary, “a preverbal/verbal stage in which a child (around 6-18 months of age) begins to develop a sense of separateness from her mother as well as other people and objects”. Second is the Symbolic, which “marks a child’s entrance into language”. Additionally, Siegel contrasts the Symbolic to the Imaginary, noting the shift of attention from mother to father, who, according to Lacan, “represents cultural norms, laws, language, and power”. Lastly, the Real is described as “an unattainable stage representing all that a person is not and does not have”. Lacan’s
interpretation is more along the lines of an expansion on Freud’s idea, with Lacan stressing the involvement of language more so than Freud.

With an understanding of Freud and Lacan’s contributions to and description of psychoanalytic theory, I was able to critique Duras’ novel, The Lover, coming to my own conclusions about Duras’ and her work as a result of applying psychoanalysis to my critique. To better understand Duras’ psyche while writing The Lover, a basic understanding of her past is necessary. Duras was born on April 4, 1914 in a French colony of Indochina (now Vietnam), moving to Paris at the age of seventeen. Her father died when she was four years old and her mother lost the family savings to dishonest colonial officials from whom she had purchased what turned out to be a worthless rice plantation. Her family troubles are common throughout her canon of work (Gale).

Duras was a divorced mother of one and spent her literary career as a novelist, screenwriter, and playwright until her death on March 3, 1996. She opposed the increasingly popular Communist party and wrote for Anti-Communist relief efforts. Her novel The Lover, was written in 1984 while recovering from alcoholism in a treatment center (“Marguerite Duras”). A thirty-year gap between the publishing of her novels The Sea Wall and The Lover allowed Duras to deal with aspects of her family she previously left untouched: “I’ve written a good deal about the members of my family, but then they were still alive, my mother and my brothers. And I skirted around them, skirted around all these things without really touching them” (Duras 7).

In understanding Duras’ life prior to her authoring The Lover, a better analysis of the novel can be performed. The thematic reoccurrence based on her family struggles is again seen in The Lover. The locale of her novel is centered in Saigon, the French colonial region Vietnam in which Duras lived until the age of seventeen. Duras, who wrote her novel from the perspective of a sixty year old woman, choosing to switch between first and third person narrative in order to focus on the memories of past events rather than the events themselves, described a feeling towards her homeland intrinsically, during a bus ride from Sadec: “I’m fifteen and a half. Crossing the river. Going back to Saigon I feel I’m going on a journey, especially when I take the bus…” (Duras 9). On this journey she describes a photograph taken of her mother, her siblings, and herself when she was four years old, just after the death of her father. She examines her mother, recognizing “the way she doesn’t smile” and an overall “despondency about living” (14). Duras then attempts to understand the reason for her mother’s depressed existence: “Was it the death, already at hand, of my father? Or the dying of the light? Doubts about her marriage? About her husband? About her children? Or about all these appearances in general?” (14-5).

Applying Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories to my critique of Duras’ reflection, along with the biographical preface to my study, left me with particular hypotheses about her psyche as a child. In this scene, the sixty-year old woman is actually using her subconscious, or Freud’s “Id”, in the attempt to understand her mother’s aforementioned despondency towards life. In most instances, one may deduce that reflecting on a previous event in one’s life from the perspective of an older age would produce better insight into the situation, due to the inevitable unfolding of events as time passes, and as a result, entrance into one’s subconscious would be permitted. However, according to Freud, the unconscious is “uncanny”, or unfamiliar, and that we are oblivious as to how and when it operates (Freud 418). So, under the assumption that
Freud’s theory is true, a psychoanalytic critic would believe that she was not interpreting the true emotions and memories stored in her subconscious.

Furthermore, Freud states that “we are molded as people by our subconscious memories, projecting our suppressed feelings onto others, splitting personas (i.e. good father/bad father), and displacement”, (Rivkin and Ryan 390). This would explain her seemingly obsessive analysis of her mother in the family photograph. We do know that many feelings stemming from her childhood continue to weigh heavily on her mind; however, the Freudian definition of psychoanalysis restricts Duras from achieving familiarity with her unconscious.

Freud and Lacan both believe that absolute reality is unattainable, but that we as individuals look to establish a relationship between our selves and that unattainable reality (443). This interest in realism is something that critics note in Duras’ writing. In her later works, Duras tended to shift her focus to the emotional experience of the past events in her life, rather than the actual event itself (“Marguerite Duras”), a more reflective state of consciousness, but still not the state of the unconscious.

Another event in The Lover that mirrored Duras’ life is contained in the overall premise of her novel, a mysterious love affair with an older, not to be confused with elderly, Asian gentleman. In her life, Duras had an Asian lover named Lee, and this was the basis for her writing of The Lover. She uses her novel to document her experiences with the man, first describing him on page 17: “Inside the limousine there’s a very elegant man looking at me. He’s not a white man. He’s wearing European clothes – the light tussore suit of Saigon bankers. He’s looking at me.” The relationship evolves and Duras describes, in vivid detail, her first sexual experience with the twenty-seven year old man between pages 36 and 39. Later in the novel, the Saigon banker’s disapproving father trumps the love affair.

Psychoanalytically, this affair, being that it took place between a fifteen and twenty-seven year old, reminded me of Freud’s Oedipus Complex, along with his belief that children do possess sexuality, however oppressed or unfamiliar with it they may be (Rivkin and Ryan 390). This was in fact the unnamed narrator’s first sexual encounter with a man, but at fifteen, still considered a child, she found it within herself to express her sexual desires without ever confronting them before.

Duras’ novel The Lover, can be thoroughly analyzed from a psychoanalytic vantage point thanks to its autobiographical nature. I found that her familial troubles and sexual affair with an older man were two instances that provided a wealth of detail about Duras’ psyche as a young woman. Prefacing the study of a work of literature with some sort of biographical information absolutely assisted in my application of psychoanalytic theory to Duras’ novel. With this school of criticism, we are able to better understand the psyche of a writer, and the reasons why they write.
Works Cited