Interdisciplinary Applications of Horney

[This is Appendix A of Karen Horney: A Psychoanalyst's Search for Self-Understanding (Yale U.P., 1994). I have included a much-edited list of References for this book to make the references in the text more useful. I have subsequently employed Horney in the study of additional literary works in Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature (NYU Press, 1997), two chapters of which are posted on my personal website, which also contains links to electronic versions of three of my books using Horney in the study of literature (see links). The works studied in Imagined Human Beings include Antigone, "The Clerk's Tale" (Chaucer), The Merchant of Venice, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Madame Bovary, Great Expectations, The Mayor of Casterbridge, A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, The Awakening (Chopin), and The End of the Road (Barth).]

Bernard J. Paris

Horney's contribution to psychological thought is one measure of her significance. Another, of perhaps equal importance, is the value of her theory to other disciplines. So far, it has been used in the study of literature, biography, culture, and gender.

Literature

I have been developing a Horneyan approach to literature since 1964, when I realized that the thematic contradictions of Thackeray's Vanity Fair become intelligible if we see them as part of a system of psychological conflicts. A strong case can be made that William Dobbin and Amelia Sedley are the normative characters in Vanity Fair and that Becky Sharp is the chief object of satire. Becky ruthlessly pursues money, power, and prestige, which are shown to be vanities, while Amelia and Dobbin live for love, friendship, and emotional fulfillment, which are glorified by the narrator. The narrator also satirizes Dobbin, however, whom he calls a "spooney" (someone foolishly in love), and Amelia, whom he calls a "tender little parasite." Despite the glorification of love and friendship, the action and some of the commentary show them to be just as fleeting or disappointing as social and economic triumph.

The novel's thematic contradictions make sense if we see them as manifestations of a basic conflict in which compliant tendencies predominate but are continually at war with a powerful submerged aggressiveness. I locate this conflict in the implied author of the novel, that is, in the Thackeray we can infer from the text itself. Thackeray's compliant tendencies manifest themselves in his glorification of self-effacing attitudes, values, and characters, in his attacks on worldly, ambitious people and the social system that spawns them, and in his insistence that the pursuit of money, power, and prestige is destructive and unrewarding. His aggressive tendencies manifest themselves in his obvious delight in Becky and her triumphs and in the scorn he shares with her for the weakness and folly of the self-effacing characters. Tendencies toward detachment also figure prominently in the psychic structure of Vanity Fair. They are manifested in the conclusion that all is vanity and in the narrator's irony, often unfocused, which is the means by which Thackeray negates what he has affirmed and protects himself from the consequences of commitment (see Paris 1974).
There are many other literary works in which thematic contradictions make it impossible to understand the text in its own terms. Critics have often defended the artistic unity of such works by suppressing awareness of subversive elements or by rationalizing contradictions as part of a controlled structure of tension, paradox, and irony. More recently they have tended to delight in contradictions as evidence of the tendency of all linguistic structures to deconstruct themselves. With the help of Horney's theory we are often able both to recognize inconsistencies as genuine problems and to make sense of them as parts of an intelligible structure of inner conflicts.

After explaining the thematic contradictions of *Vanity Fair*, I realized that Horney also enables us to recover Thackeray's profound psychological intuitions about his major characters. As I taught other literary works, I came to see that they often contain brilliantly realized characters whose motivational systems can be understood in Horneyan terms. This has led to a series of Horneyan studies by myself and others, many of which focus on character.¹

One of the chief objections to the psychoanalytic study of character has been its reliance on infantile experience to account for the behavior of the adult. This results in the generation of crucial explanatory material out of the premises of the theory, with no corroborating literary evidence except the supposed results of the invented experiences, which were inferred from these results to begin with. Horney's structural approach is highly suitable for the analysis of literary characters, since we are often supplied with ample information about their existing defenses, however sketchy their childhoods. Because it describes the kinds of phenomena that are actually portrayed, it permits us to stick to the text.

It is important to distinguish between the psychological portrait and the rhetoric by which a character is surrounded. By rhetoric I mean all the devices an author employs to influence readers' moral and intellectual responses, their sympathy and antipathy, their emotional closeness or distance. When we understand realistically drawn characters in psychological terms, we usually find ourselves responding to them in ways that are different from those that the rhetoric seeks to induce (see Paris 1974, 1978b, 1991b, 1991c). This often points to a tension in the work between rhetoric and mimesis, between authors' interpretations and judgments and the characters they have actually created. Although the rhetoric may tell us little that is reliable about the character, it gives us a great deal of insight into the implied author of the work and perhaps into the author as a person.

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 the individual work. Even so, it is possible to tell a good deal about authors from their works 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 this delicate enterprise, Horney's theory is again very helpful.

Horneyan psychology can help us to illuminate authors through their works because in the course of artistic creation their defensive strategies tend to manifest 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 personality traits 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 they cannot help also expressing their subordinate trends, their works will frequently manifest their inner conflicts. Their attitudes, values, and beliefs will then 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 that they have toward the aspects of themselves the characters embody. The relationships among their solutions may vary in the course of their lives; and this will be reflected in the kinds of characters they portray, in their rhetoric, and in their dominant fantasies (see Paris 1976a, 1978b, 1991a).

A Horneyan approach also has a great deal to tell us about reader response and the interpretive process. Just as every analyst has what Horney calls a "personal equation," so, too, the reader's constellation of defenses affects the way in which he or she responds to the author's presentation of various defensive strategies. There are no doubt psychological reasons why some readers feel that Thackeray is entirely approving of Dobbin and Amelia and hostile toward Becky Sharp, while others feel that he secretly despises Dobbin and Amelia and admires Becky, while yet others feel that he is a brilliant ironist who sees through everything and takes no position himself. It may be possible through Horneyan analysis to make sense of the Babel of interpretations and to see them all as responding to some aspects of the text while suppressing awareness of others.

Horneyan theory also sheds light on narrative techniques, such as multiple or unreliable narrators, and on the relation between fictional plots and strategies of defense (Paris 1974, 1986c, 1991c).

Biography

Horney's synchronic approach has immense potential for psychobiography. Like the literary critic approaching an author or a character, the biographer usually has much information about the adult but little or none about early childhood. Horney's theory enables us to explain the character structure and behavior of the adult without relying on infantile origins. So far it has been used in a major way in biographical studies of Robert Frost (Thompson 1966, 1970, 1976), Charles Evans Hughes (Glad 1966), the Kennedys (Clinch 1973), Stalin (Tucker, 1973, 1990), Woodrow Wilson (Tucker 1977), Jimmy Carter (Glad 1980; see also 1973), Felix Frankfurter (Hirsch 1981), and Lyndon Johnson (Huffman 1989). All of these studies deserve discussion, but I have space only for a few words about Thompson on Frost and Tucker on Stalin.

Lawrance Thompson accepted Robert 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, he 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," Thompson wrote in his
notebook, "it couldn't have come closer to giving a psychological framework to what I've been trying to say" (Sheehy 1986, 398). Thompson's notebook contains one hundred and thirty pages of notes and excerpts from Horney interspersed with applications to Frost, such 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, 405).

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).

Interestingly, we would not know that Thompson had used Horney without the work of Donald Sheehy, who has examined the Thompson papers in the University of Virginia library. Although Horney's ideas gave an interpretive structure to the biography, she is not mentioned in the text, the footnotes, or the index of any of the volumes.

Robert Tucker was serving in the American embassy in Moscow when Neurosis and Human Growth was published in 1950. After reading the book, he was suddenly struck by "a momentous thought": "What if the idealized image of Stalin, appearing day after day in the party-controlled, party-supervised Soviet press, were an idealized image in Horney's sense?" If so, "the Stalin cult must reflect Stalin's own monstrously inflated vision of himself as the greatest genius of Russian and world history." This Kremlin recluse, "who was publicly so reticent about himself, must be spilling out his innermost thoughts concerning himself in millions of newspapers and journals published throughout Russia." One could psychoanalyze Stalin "by reading Pravda, while rereading Horney!" (1985, 251).

Tucker felt that books about totalitarianism, such as Hannah Arendt's, were "deeply flawed because the dictator and his psychodynamics were missing from the picture." A dictator can "politically institutionalize the inner defenses of his ever-threatened idealized self" and "mobilize a vast apparatus of repression to visit revenge not only on individuals whom he had come to perceive as enemies but on entire social groups so perceived." The Holocaust "might have been Adolf Hitler's enactment of vindictive hostility stemming from neurotically generated self-hatred projected onto the Jews as a group" (254; see also Tucker, 1965).

Tucker's thesis about the role of Stalin's personality in Soviet policy was confirmed by Nikita Khrushchev's secret report "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences":

He depicted Stalin as a man of colossal grandiosities, along with profound insecurity that caused him to need constant affirmation of his imagined greatness. Khrushchev portrayed a neurotic
personality precisely in Horney's sense, an example of the "arrogant-vindictive" type described in *Neurosis and Human Growth*. A self-idealizer, insatiably hungry for the glorification that the public cult provided, Stalin was easily aroused to vindictive hostility by whatever appeared to detract from his inflated vision of himself as a leader and teacher of genius. His aggressions, typically expressed in purges . . . were the other side of his self-glorification. (259)

Now confident of his hypothesis, Tucker embarked upon his ambitious study of Stalin, the third and final volume of which is in progress.

There are numerous literary figures whose lives can be understood from a Horneyan perspective and many fascinating people, from earlier centuries as well as our own, who are prime subjects for this kind of analysis. I anticipate many more biographical applications of Horney.

**Culture**

Several writers have used Horney in the analysis of American culture. In *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954), David M. Potter draws upon Horney, along with Margaret Mead and David Riesman, as a social scientist whose findings support the idea of a national character and help to define the American one. He is particularly struck by her analysis of the character traits, inner conflicts, and vicious circles created by the competitiveness of our culture. He relates it to his concern with the effects of abundance by observing that increased abundance "means increased rewards in the competitive struggle," and increased rewards mean an increased premium on competitive efficiency. This brings about a heightened aggressiveness, which creates inner conflicts and is self-defeating. We trade security for opportunity and then experience the anxieties attendant upon lack of security. We are driven to enter the competitive contest at the price of becoming neurotic "because society itself regards the rewards as irresistible and is determined to compel everyone to strive for them" (71-72).

In *The Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life* (1989), Paul Wachtel also argues that "there is something compulsive, irrational, and self-defeating" in the way we pursue an ever increasing wealth. While not saying that the whole population is neurotically aggressive, Wachtel feels that Horney's "concept of the moving-against . . . trend captures something important about the manifest patterns of behavior that most characterize our public life and the workings of our economic system" (78). We promote competition rather than mutual support, and in our relation to nature and the environment, "we strive for conquest and domination." We are afraid of being perceived as "a 'pitiful helpless giant' and will commit unreasonable acts of aggression to ward off that feared image" (75). Caught in a vicious circle, we anxiously rely "on the production and accumulation of goods" for our sense of security (79) and continue to do this despite the fact that it makes us more insecure. Wachtel develops these ideas further in "The Preoccupation with Economic Growth: An Analysis Informed by Horneyan Theory" (1991).

Potter draws upon *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* and Wachtel upon *Our Inner Conflicts*. In a book-in-progress that promises to be the most sophisticated application of Horney to the study of American culture, James Huffman employs her entire mature theory. He has already articulated some of his main themes in "A Psychological Critique of American Culture" (1982).
Instead of stressing affluence like Potter, Huffman emphasizes the senses of threat and of inferiority that have influenced our national behavior. In its youth the nation was regarded as culturally and socially inferior by the established European powers, and during its expansion, life on the frontier was hazardous. In the cities there was a Darwinian environment, and immigrants, usually poor and oppressed in their homelands, were both discriminated against and perceived as a threat by their new countrymen.

These pressures produced compensatory defenses, and, as a result, much of American history reveals a search for glory and an "idealized image of American character. Americans began to believe that the United States would be the greatest nation on earth, then that it was already the greatest nation, and perhaps that it always would be." Because of an inflated sense of our own importance, "we place exaggerated claims on other nations to defer to our wishes, consult us before making any decisions, and treat us like the rulers and peacemakers of the earth" (1982, 31). Like Potter and Wachtel, Huffman observes that "aggressive competition" marks our economic life far "more than cooperation" (35). We like our leaders to be belligerent and glorify people who fight their way to the top. There are other trends in our culture that conflict with the aggressive ones, of course. Huffman proposes to show how Horneyan patterns manifest themselves in popular culture, in politics, in religion and business, and in American history from the revolution to the present. His biographical study of Lyndon Johnson (1989) will become part of his treatment of "Neurosis and the Presidency."

There have also been Horneyan analyses of aspects of Elizabethan and Victorian culture (Paris 1991a, 1986).

**Gender**

As we have seen, Horney has been rediscovered in recent years by feminists, many of whose positions she had anticipated. By and large, those who are interested in feminine psychology or, more broadly, in gender studies have focused on Horney's early essays and have paid little attention to her mature theory, which is not specifically directed to their concerns. The mature theory has important implications, however, for our understanding of gender identity and of masculine and feminine psychology in our culture. Impressive work has been done along these lines by Alexandra Symonds, a Horneyan analyst, and Marcia Westkott, a social psychologist. Horney's mature theory has also been used to address gender issues in popular books by Helen De Rosis and Victoria Pellegrino (1976) and by Claudette Dowling (1981). In this, as in the other areas of application I have discussed, much remains to be done.

Alexandra Symonds' essays are based largely on her clinical experience with women who were suffering from their feminine role, who were trying to escape from that role but finding it difficult, or who seemed to have escaped but were having trouble dealing with the consequences. In every case the starting point was a culture that conditioned girls to be self-effacing and dependent, while boys were encouraged to be autonomous and aggressive. While focusing on the plight of girls, Symonds recognized that boys develop difficulties of their own "as a result of cultural stereotyping" (1974, 178).
In "Neurotic Dependency in Successful Women" (1976), Symonds analyzes the problems of women who had difficulty taking advantage of new opportunities because of "psychological patterns which were developed for a totally different emotional climate" (98). In "The Psychodynamics of Expansiveness in the Success-Oriented Woman" (1978), she focuses on women who had developed a predominantly aggressive personality from an early age. Their problems were partly the result of their inability to escape the gender identity prescribed by their culture. They needed to succeed in their careers but also to be nurturers.

In "Gender Issues and Horney Theory" (1991), her last essay, Dr. Symonds observes that despite the great changes of the past twenty years, women still have difficulty freeing themselves from compulsive compliance. "In our culture when men are self-effacing it violates their own expectation of what a man should be. They are pleased when as a result of therapy they are able to be more directly assertive, even aggressive. Women do not necessarily welcome this change and each step of the way is much more complicated." Since they have deep conflicts concerning the aggressive pursuit of success, and they often "sabotage themselves in various ways to prevent their emerging sense of power and mastery" (305-306).

In The Feminist Legacy of Karen Horney (1986), Marcia Westkott explores the implications of Horney's mature theory for feminine psychology, with chapters on the sexualization and devaluation of women and the dependency, anger, and detachment they feel as a result. She also develops a Horneyan critique of a major strand of feminist theory.

Jean Baker Miller, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and the Stone Center group associate an array of personality traits specifically with women. These include a need for affiliation, a nurturing disposition, a sense of responsibility for other people, and a relational sense of identity. Westkott observes that although these traits are regarded in a very positive way, they emerged "from a historical setting in which women are less highly valued than men." "This paradox" suggests "an underside to the nurturance and affiliation" that requires exploration (1986, 2). What Westkott finds is that these traits are defensive reactions to subordination, devaluation, and powerlessness and that, however desirable they may seem from a social point of view, they are not good for women's self-actualization.

Whereas Chodorow argues that women's nurturing disposition derives from an extended attachment between mother and daughter that fosters the development of empathy, Westkott contends that it derives from a "culturally rooted . . . imperative" (134) that enjoins females to take care of others, including their parents. Girls receive less nurturing than boys; they are required to grow up more quickly and to make fewer demands for attention. For Westkott, female altruism "is a contradiction in which the undernurtured nurturer gives what she does not have in order to be 'loved' by those who have disregard or even contempt for her true self and needs" (139-140). The girl is "angry at those who deny her true self," but because of her insecurity she turns her anger against herself, admires the devaluing adults, and tries to gain a sense of safety, worth, and belonging by being what they want her to be. Having been undernurtured themselves, mothers look to their daughters for nurturing, thus perpetuating the demand for female self-sacrifice.
In "Female Relationality and the Idealized Self" (1989), Westkott argues that "the self-in-relation is not the authentic self that the Stone Center theorists presume it to be, but the idealized self that Horney associated with self-effacement." The girl develops a set of shoulds that involve "doing for others, caring for them, making their needs the sources of her motives, complying with others's demands for recognition." She needs others to validate her idealized image of herself as caring, empathetic, and lovable. The collapse of a relationship or a sense that she has not been caring or sensitive enough makes her feel like her despised self and triggers enormous self-hate. Since she feels angry with herself when she fails to live up to her shoulds and angry with others for having forced her "to repress desires for individual self-fulfillment," the idealized relational self "perpetuates self-criticism and anger as ongoing intrapsychic processes" (247-48).

Westkott thus demythifies the celebration of female relationality, arguing that it has provided "a contemporary theoretical justification for traditionally idealized femininity" (245), that is, for self-effacing behavior. She contends, with Horney, that being deprived is not ennobling but damaging and that the compliant qualities many women develop in order to cope with devaluation are destructive. The feminist revolt against the role Western culture has imposed upon women is turning into a reinforcement of that role insofar as women are being told that they need "to 'affiliate' with others in order to validate" their "idealized nurturant" selves (1986, 140).

Westkott contends that Horney's mature theory is at bottom about the psychology of women, but since it describes me, many men that I know, and a host of male authors, characters, and historical figures, I am convinced that it works as well for men as it does for women and that we have much to learn from it about male as well as female gender issues.


References


