

Freud - the misunderstood misogynist

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Monday, 1 December 2008

One of the most influential thinkers of the modern era has been Sigmund Freud, not just in the field of psychology but in general philosophy and modern thinking as well.



Yoda - Jedi Knight of the Galactic Council



Sigmund - Jedi Knight of the human psyche. Notice the similar Jedi Knight scowl

Freud did of course write in the early 1900s in Vienna. At that time and place sexual freedom was not a big thing. If women displayed their ankles in public it was a scandal. This is often cited as one reason why he was so focused on sex in his writing and theorising. And in more recent times this is why he has come in for some flak for being so sexist in his writing.

As a prime example consider this quotation from him (Ref: On the transformation of instincts with special reference to anal eroticism)

"If we penetrate deeply into the neuroses of women, we not infrequently meet with the repressed wish to possess a penis. We call this infantile wish "penis-envy" and include it within the castration complex..."



As one can imagine the women's movement of the current day find such comments somewhat offensive. However barring that there is a general consensus that Freud was too focused on sex and sexuality in his writings.

However there is one other factor that is gaining more consideration in recent times. The above quotation on penis envy, Freud did not actually make. It was

made by James Strachey. He has been the official translator of Freud's writings. That includes the 24 volumes, which are the "Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud". All of Freud's main writings on psychology he wrote in German. They were not written in English. So they had to be translated for the English reading people of the world. Myself, not being fluent in German means that I do not know what Freud said. I only know what James Strachey said Freud said.

The world renowned German born psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim has resoundly criticised the translations by Strachey. He states that the translations are by and large mistranslations that present Freud's theories as a set of rigid rules when in fact the theory allows for much more flexibility.

Not only was Freud an excellent observer of human nature he is also seen as one of the great writer's of his time. His literary skills were of a very high standard. His use of the German language was seen as masterful and even poetic. This has been commented on by great German writers such as Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. Albert Einstein has said that he admired Freud particularly for his mastery of the German language. His ability as a writer was exceptional (regardless of what he was writing about).

As a consequence of this the translations have resulted in clumsy substitutions and inexact words that have damaged his ideas so they have become coarse and oversimplified.

The notion of 'penis envy' is a good example. The way it is presented in English it reads as though the female envies the physical male genitalia of the penis. When perhaps a more accurate translation could be that the female envies what the penis symbolises - namely power. The symbol of the phallus (penis) has throughout history and cultures been used to symbolise power.

Thus we do not have penis envy instead we have 'power envy'. Now that is a far more plausible theory and one, which I for one would think, is accurate. Prior to the women's liberation movement of the 1960's women felt envious of the power that males had and so they set about creating political action so they could get some. Certainly Vienna in the early 1900s was a very patriarchal society and there would have been considerable 'power envy' by females.