

**The enigma of desire: an interface between psychoanalysis and literature****O enigma do desejo: uma interface entre psicanálise e literatura****El enigma del deseo: una interfaz entre psicoanálisis y literatura****Received: 14/05/2020****Approved: 09/12 /2020****Published: 18/04/2021****Rita de Cássia Ramos<sup>1</sup>****Paulo Rodrigo Unzer Falcade<sup>2</sup>****Araceli Albino<sup>3</sup>**

This is a narrative review carried out in the first half of 2020. It aims to describe the notion of desire based on Lacanian and Freudian theory, and with the symbolic aid of a literary text with a similar perspective. This work presents the following topics: *the enigma of the notion of desire, theoretical delimitation, psychoanalytical definition, link between literature and psychoanalysis and literary illustration*. From this path, it was found that the psychoanalytic definition of desire, which differs from that of common and philosophical senses, finds correspondence in a poem by the Brazilian symbolist writer Camilo Pessanha.

**Descriptors:** Libido; Psychoanalysis; Freudian theory; Literature; Poetry.

Esta é uma revisão narrativa realizada no primeiro semestre de 2020, com o objetivo de escrever a noção de desejo fundamentada na teoria lacaniana e freudiana e ilustrá-la com um texto literário portador de perspectiva análoga. Este trabalho apresenta os seguintes tópicos: *o enigma da noção de desejo, delimitação teórica, definição psicanalítica, laço entre literatura e psicanálise e ilustração literária*. A partir desse percurso, verificou-se que a definição psicanalítica do desejo, que difere da proveniente do senso comum e da filosófica, encontra correspondência em um poema do escritor simbolista Camilo Pessanha.

**Descritores:** Libido; Psicanálise; Teoria freudiana; Literatura, Poesia.

Esta es una revisión narrativa realizada en el primer semestre de 2020, cuyo objetivo es describir la noción de deseo fundamentada en la teoría lacaniana y freudiana e ilustrarla con un texto literario de perspectiva análoga. Este trabajo presenta los siguientes temas: *el enigma de la noción de deseo, delimitación teórica, definición psicoanalítica, vínculo entre literatura y psicoanálisis e ilustración literaria*. En el artículo, se encontró que la definición psicoanalítica del deseo, que difiere de la proveniente del sentido común y de la filosófica, encuentra correspondencia en un poema del escritor simbolista Camilo Pessanha.

**Descriptores:** Libido; Psicoanálisis; Teoría freudiana; Literatura; Poesía.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, psychoanalysis has shown its effectiveness both in treating a large number of psychopathologies, as well as in resolving family, marital and even professional conflicts<sup>1</sup>. The frequency with which psychoanalysis is requested to understand social events attests to its importance and the extent of its applicability.

Thus, the notions of psychoanalysis are referred to within and outside the analytical field, but not always with the proper understanding, as it occurs with the notion of desire. The fact that the term is very popular and polysemic contributes to its imprecision. In the thesaurus<sup>2</sup>, there are eight meanings attributed to “*desire*”. They are: “*to want*”, “*ambition*”, “*appetite*”, “*physical attraction*”, “*purpose*”, “*caprice*”, “*rapture*”, “*own will*”, and, for this set of meanings, there are more than seventy synonyms.

The notion of desire can also be confused with that arising from the philosophical field. Throughout the history of philosophy, several thinkers have presented different perspectives for understanding the question of desire. However, since psychoanalysis articulated the notion of desire from an unconscious point of view, the psychoanalytic perspective has become a constant reference, to be followed or even opposed by philosophy itself.

In the psychoanalytic domain, desire occupies a central position in Freudian and Lacanian theory. The novelty of this research is to present it in The interface with a literary text here considered as a corresponding point of view. Thus, this study aims to describe the notion of desire based on Lacanian and Freudian theory and illustrate it with a literary text with a similar perspective.

## METHODS

This is a narrative review that used works that deal with the notion of desire along the Lacanian and Freudian theoretical lines in contrast to a literary text. The choice of the poem here analyzed, in turn, respected the following criteria: it has a vision that corresponds that of psychoanalysis.

This study was carried out in the first half of 2020, and it is associated with the research of aspects of the concept of fantasy, according to the Freudian and Lacanian approach, carried out by the Lacanian study group of the institution: Núcleo de Pesquisas Psicanalíticas, São Paulo, SP, Brasil (NPP).

## RESULTS

This review was based on 17 references and was divided into the following thematic areas: *The enigma of the notion of desire*, *Theoretical delimitation*, *Psychoanalytical definition*, *Link between literature and psychoanalysis* and *Literary illustration*.

## DISCUSSION

### *The enigma of the notion of desire*

The mystery of what desire is permeates the field of Western Philosophy, which was already present in Plato’s “*Symposium*”<sup>3</sup> and remains a current issue.

The notion of desire from psychoanalysis has become a central element in the discussion of this phenomenon in the philosophical realm, either in the form of counterpoint<sup>4</sup>, or in the recognition of the philosophical notion inserted in the Freudian lineage<sup>5</sup>.

In literature, the theme of desire is a long-standing one. Its unknown element is present in texts of lyrical and tragic poets of Classical Antiquity. A possible even more remote origin is discussed: that the θυμός (thymós) of Homer's epic poems can be considered as an embryonic manifestation of the notion of desire<sup>6</sup>. In the fruitful dialogue between Literature and Psychoanalysis, from a Lacanian perspective, Sophocles' play *Antigone* was considered a perfect example of the concept of desire<sup>7</sup>.

The enigma of desire, therefore, was dealt with by Literature and Philosophy before Psychoanalysis. However, Psychoanalysis is the main reference for the elucidation of its mystery nowadays. This highlight is due especially to the fact that the problem of desire has been recognized as central in the Lacanian direction, which raised the Freudian notion to a conceptual level.

Although the enigma of desire is already solved in a Lacanian proposal, it is not always understood. This difficulty stems from the fact that the field of psychoanalytic knowledge is that of the unconscious and, therefore, it is not merely through the intellectualist path that a notion of this domain is apprehended, but rather through the legitimate and effective way of accessing the knowledge of the unconscious, which is that of analytical experience.

If nothing replaces the analytical experience as a means of access to knowledge about unconscious psychic processes, it is considered, however, in this work, that the encounter of a literary text that corresponds to the notion of desire can be productive.

### ***Theoretical delimitation***

The notion of desire concerns a field of psychoanalysis, which is well defined as that of the unconscious.

The unconscious is the basis of all psychic life, the essential reality of the psyche. This can be studied from different points of view: *descriptive, systematic, dynamic, economic and ethical*<sup>8</sup>. With an emphasis on the *ethical* aspect, Lacan states that the status of the unconscious is not ontic but ethical<sup>9</sup>.

From the descriptive point of view, the unconscious is apprehended from manifestations that arise and go beyond conscious knowledge (flawed acts, forgetfulness, dreams, sudden ideas, improvised creations of poems, concepts, symptoms)<sup>8,9</sup>.

From a systematic point of view, it is assumed that the psyche is divided into two instances: the unconscious system, in which they are found (acoustic, visual or tactile images), "*called representations of thing*", and the conscious (system formed also by -conscious), which contains the "*word representations*". Repression is the barrier that separates the two systems, but it is not infallible. The unconscious system is governed by the pleasure-displeasure principle and the conscious one by the reality principle<sup>8,9</sup>.

The dynamic point of view about the unconscious, in particular, focuses on the struggle between a driving force and the resistance operated by repression. The "*representations of things*" of the unconscious are, from this perspective, called "*repressed representatives*" and what managed to pass through the repression barrier are the distorted products of such representatives. These concealed derivatives are called "*return of the repressed*", "*products of the repressed*", or even "*products of the unconscious*"<sup>8,9</sup>.

From an economic point of view, it treats the source of excitement as a "representative of the drives" and the final productions of the unconscious as affective behaviors and spontaneous love choices supported by unconscious fantasies. The definition of the ethical point of view will be given in the next item<sup>8,9</sup>.

Throughout the history of psychoanalysis, in the Freudian and Lacanian perspective, there have been many changes in relation to the set of theoretical postulates, following the transformations that took place in all areas of knowledge, considered scientific or humanistic<sup>10</sup>.

In a schematic way, the history of psychoanalysis can be divided into orthodox, classical and contemporary. Each of these steps presents important changes in its paradigms. However, although there have been profound changes in theoretical conceptions, contemporary psychoanalysis continues to "*preserve the basic Freudian ideals and principles*"<sup>10</sup> among them, the notion of the unconscious and the drives.

The Lacanian perspective that resumes the Freudian and anthropological views, advanced in the concept of desire, bringing contributions from Linguistics, such as the conception of signifier and of an organized unconscious as language; as in Anthropology, from which he deduced the notion of the symbolic, used in the topic SIR (symbolic, imaginary, real),

as well as his reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex and the prohibition of incest. The notion of desire formulated by psychoanalysis results from this multifaceted view<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Psychoanalytical definition***

The field of psychoanalysis is that of the unconscious and the notion of desire is limited to it. In the psychoanalytic perspective, therefore, what matters in relation to the notion of desire does not concern the conscious, nor the will, but relative to unconscious psychic processes.

Psychoanalysis makes it clear that the notion of desire to which it refers refers to “*a desaturated desire and launched in the symbolic order*”, which “*can only be thought of in relation to the other's desire and what he points to is not it is the object empirically considered, but a fault*”. Articulated to this structural lack, the desire “*slides as if in an endless series, in a satisfaction that has always been postponed and never achieved*”<sup>11</sup>.

Considering the definition of unconscious from an ethical point of view, “*desire is the unconscious considered from the point of view of sexuality, that is, from the point of view of sexual pleasure*”<sup>8</sup>.

According to the ethical status of the unconscious “*desire is a drive of which we are unaware, which would have the ideal objective of absolute pleasure in an incestuous relationship*”<sup>8</sup>. This incest, however, is worth noting, it does not concern the pathological incestuous practices and prohibited by law that may be committed. The incest to which psychoanalysis refers is mythical and is coveted, in an unconscious way, as the most desired good among all, consisting of what guides the life of each human being and who decides on it.

In psychoanalytic theory, lapses that are committed, as well as dreams, have hidden meaning, which concerns the fact that they are substitutes for an ideal act, which, despite this, did not occur. This veiled meaning, in the seemingly meaningless acts perpetrated by us, is always sexual.

For psychoanalysis, humans are not instinctive beings, but instinctive, driven by tendencies originating in a defined body erogenous zone, which can be the eyes, the voice, the skin, the mouth, the anus and others, whose excitement is continued. These drives, which are multiple, are located in our unconscious and remain there from a very early age until death.

The drives follow a trajectory in search of an impossible ideal, which consists of absolute sexual satisfaction. During this journey, they are faced with repression and, if they overcome this barrier, they express themselves as substitutes for the ideal incest, which is full sexual satisfaction, impossible to achieve.

The sexual drive in the Freudian proposal is composed of four elements: the source (erogenous zone), from which the drive originates; the force, which drives the drive; the objective, which attracts it; the object (thing, or person, always being a fantasized object), which is the means by which the drive seeks to achieve its ideal objective, that is, “*the perfect pleasure of a perfect action, of a perfect union between two sexes, whose image mythical and universal would be incest*”<sup>8,12</sup>.

Psychoanalysis presupposes that all conduct, if it has a tendency originating in an erogenous zone and is supported by a fantasy that results in limited sexual pleasure, is sexual. The pleasure obtained by human sexuality, considered in the broadest sense, is different from that derived from the mere satisfaction of a physiological need.

In the components listed and addressed, we have that: the ideal goal of desire is incest; the object of desire is the fantasy of the other's desiring body; desire is born out of a defined erogenous zone, of constant excitement; the pleasure provided by the desire is partial, qualified as sexual; and, an example of the Other of desire, is the desiring and desired mother<sup>8</sup>. In desire, attachment to the desired other corresponds to “*attachment to a fantasized object, polarized around an erogenous zone located in the body of the other*”<sup>8</sup>.

Desire differs from both need and love. The need concerns an organic tendency, which starts from an organic zone, with a view to self-preservation and the pleasure obtained is that

of satiation, as in that of the feeding mother. Love, in turn, follows the tendency of merging with the beloved. The imaginary object is the idealized similar and sexual pleasure is sublimated and an example of the Other of love is the ideal mother<sup>8</sup>.

In itself, the *I desire desire to desire*, but that would be precisely what would be more sublime than the desire in Lacan's speech, because there is a risk that the desire will be captured by a symptom, which is the case in neuroses, and there is a risk of the desire will be captured by a fetish, which is the case in perversions. So, desire is neither in the field of symptoms, nor in the field of fetish; desire, in a way, would be what resists the eagerness to enjoy, without also neutralizing this desire for enjoyment, so, deep down, the desire is what maintains human liveliness.

### ***Link between literature and psychoanalysis***

There are differences between psychoanalytic discourse and literary discourse, but there are also points of contact. From the proximity between both, literary criticism uses psychoanalytic assumptions to interpret a particular work and psychoanalysis theorists, in turn, from the beginning, have an interest in the enigmatic language of texts produced by creative writers because they manifest unconscious contents.

Writers must be respected, since they can teach a lot about unconscious knowledge. According to Mango (2014 p.18)<sup>13</sup>, "*Freud had the courage to introduce the figure of Dichter, of the poet, severely separated by the academy of his time into scientific knowledge*"<sup>13</sup>, so that the texts prepared by creative writers provide an unparalleled access to psychic reality, recognizing here the important relationship between psychoanalysis and literature.

The occupation of classical psychiatry was to describe illnesses and, in the Freudian view and practice, it goes beyond the limit of the science of the time, since the interest was focused on the understanding of psyche as a whole, not refusing, on the contrary, insisting on research on unconscious processes. Positivist medicine or biology is not concerned with the unconscious, but with poetry and its ambivalences, deviations, disguises, concealments and revelations"<sup>14</sup>.

Through different paths and procedures, psychoanalysis and literature end up touching the complexity of human interiority. The search for a dialogue between these two different fields, proves to be productive for the elucidation of enigmas, in an attempt to understand the notion of desire.

### ***Literary illustration***

In the poem by Camilo Pessanha<sup>15</sup>, considered by some as the most original writer of Portuguese symbolism, there is a dialogue between Psychoanalysis and Literature, looking for reflective maturity on the notion of the enigma of desire. This poem offers, both in terms of content and form, that an understanding of the problem of desire is inseparable.

The text interpreted here belongs to Symbolism, a movement that emerged in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and from there it spread internationally, covering various artistic branches, mainly poetry. However, "*not all literature that uses the symbol is symbolist, but universal poetry is all of it in symbolic essence*". *Symbolist poetry is that which sought to "install an aesthetic creed based on the subjective, the personal, the suggestion and the vague, the mysterious and illogical, the indirect and symbolic expression"*<sup>15</sup>. The poem presented, brings stanzas, and a dotted one:

*Se andava no jardim,  
Que cheiro de jasmim!  
Tão branca do luar!  
(...)*

*Eis tenho-a junto a mim.  
Vencida, é minha, enfim,  
Após tanto a sonhar...*

*Porque entristeço assim?  
Não era ela, mas sim  
(O que eu quis abraçar)*

*A hora do jardim...  
O aroma do jasmim...  
A onda do luar...  
(Pessanha, p. 28) <sup>16</sup>*

*If I walked in the garden,  
What a smell of jasmine!  
So white from the moonlight!  
(...)*

*Here I have it with me.  
Beaten, she is mine, anyway,  
After so much dreaming...*

*Why do I grieve like that?  
It wasn't her, but yes  
(What I wanted to embrace)*

*Garden time...  
The scent of jasmine...  
The wave of moonlight...*

In an initial exploration, it appears that the poem is composed of five stanzas, each with three hexasyllable verses (six metric syllables) and following the same rhyme scheme (AAB). The function of a literary text is to provoke aesthetic pleasure and this poem succeeds in that, by using this poetic form that captivates the reader by the lightness of the rhythm of his short verse.

In the first stanza, you can notice the presence of a persona that expresses their state of mind. From the point of view of poetic creation, this "I" is fictional, an element used in the artistic process and which is not to be confused with the person of the poet.

In it, the persona of this poem affirms its ecstasy in front of a female figure, at a time when he was walking through a perfumed and moonlit garden and there the view. The woman, in perfect harmony with the symbolist poetics, according to which the suggestion should prevail over the description of the object, is pointed out in a very discreet way, only by the adjective "white", a term that says less about the color of the female skin than over the whiteness of the moonlight that illuminates the garden. In this stanza, the poetic subject reveals himself to be overpowered by a desire and, as he is the desiring person, the woman starts to occupy the position of object of his desire.

In the original poem, the next stanza is constructed only by means of suggestive punctuation, and through this graphic resource, all the effort of the persona is evidenced for the conquest of its object. The dotted lines thus express much more than if they were complete with words.

In the following stanza, the persona puts the moment of the accomplishment of the act of conquest in the foreground. The words with which he refers to the woman who was conquered show his position as a passive object. They are: "a", personal pronoun used in the oblique form, proper form of the syntactic function of object; "vencida" (*beaten*), past participle and "minha" (*mine*), possessive pronoun. The persona is clearly presented in the place of an agent of loving empowerment.

In addition, in this stanza, there is a contrast between two terms: "vencida" and "sonhar" (*dreaming*), which refer to the separation between two planes: that of the concrete world and that of fantasy. It is noteworthy the strength that, in the poem, the presence of women in the dream universe or the daydreams of the persona is covered, as suggested by the adverb of intensity "tanto" (*so much*). Also worthy of note is the marking in the poem of a temporal

dichotomy: a time of unfulfilled desire and a time of its fulfillment, referred to by the adverb "após" (*after*).

In the fourth stanza, the rupture occurs: the poetic subject puts in the foreground an unexpected sadness, the result of a deceptive movement, which is only perceived by him at the moment when the conquest was consummated. In the moment after the conquest, marked by the term "após", the persona, instead of being happy to have achieved possession of the object of his desire, is frustrated, disappointed. Which seems incomprehensible. His sadness, as he affirms, reveals to himself something of which he was not aware: it was not that woman he saw as the object of his desire. There is a mismatch between the ideal and the real.

The verb "abraçar" (*embrace*) shows that it was at the time of this concrete action that the persona was disappointed, because the supposed object of his desire, when being wrapped around his arms, did not offer him the desired experience: the sensation of completeness, which was outlined in the unconscious dimension, in the form of a fantasy.

Here, the vulnerability that inhabits the "I" in its relationship with the object of its desire is highlighted, which Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis shows when dealing with the notion of desire. The subject, who hoped to have an experience of completeness, is disappointed because the object of desire is intrinsically a sliding object, articulated to an unconscious fantasy.

In the poem, the persona does not question what causes him sadness. In the analytical experience, if this complaint were presented, it would have a subjective cut and the reasons for this feeling would be questioned by the subject himself, there would be a subjective implication on this feeling. In the poem, however, the persona seems to intuit the impossibility of the encounter between subject and object, it does not state clearly, but it seems to have a knowledge about the impossibility of the realization of the fantasy that unconsciously moves it to an object incapable of completing its structural lack.

In the final stanza, in a reflexive movement, this idea that it is impossible to satisfy the desire is suggested from expressions that suggest unattainable things, with which the persona tries to cover the fluidity of the object's field: "hora do jardim" (*garden time*), "aroma do jasmim" (*scent of jasmine*), "onda do luar" (*wave of moonlight*). Thus, in a circular movement that presupposes the continuous movement of his own desire, he resumes the moment before the fulfillment of his desire.

The negative form of Pessanha (1989)<sup>16</sup> when referring to desire, in this poem, is an element confirmed by literary criticism:

*In all of Pessanha's work, it seems to us that there is only one or the other poem in which desire appears to us in its affirmative, positive moment (...). In the others, of which a good example begins with the verse "Se andava no jardim" (If I walked in the garden), we always have the reverse side of the medal, the moment when the inconsistency of the object of desire is evident and, therefore, the impossibility of loving fulfillment.<sup>17</sup>*

The literary critic<sup>17</sup> affirms that it is not just this poem, but with rare exceptions, all of Pessanha's work is marked by the negativity of desire. This negativity of desire, which is also pointed out by Psychoanalysis, especially from the teaching of Lacanian.

A bigger lesson that remains, from this association between the theory of psychoanalysis and the experience produced by reading the poem, is that, although the object of desire is inconsistent, the desire itself is indestructible, as Psychoanalysis states, because refers to the ideal of mythical incest. In the poem, this indestructibility of desire is evident in the use of the verb "embrace", an action desired by the persona from the beginning, in which the means of fulfilling the desire was illusory to him as a woman seen in a garden with a charming atmosphere.

In this suggestive symbolist punctuation: "(O que eu quis abraçar)" (*What I wanted to embrace*)), the parentheses acquire a meaning that contributes to the final coherence of this poetic text. The parenthesis suggests the very act of embracing, an action that, only in the realm

of fantasy, could retain its object of desire, which, from the point of view of Psychoanalysis, alludes to the fantasy of the desiring body of the Other. Thus, the parentheses allude to the paradox of desire: although impossible, the relationship of total completeness between subject and object is always desired.

## CONCLUSION

In this work, some aspects of the question of desire were seen, considering the psychoanalytic perspective in interface with a literary text, recognizing the supreme role of desire for the maintenance of human vivacity, insofar as the desire is opposed to the deadly movement of enjoying.

The reading and interpretation of a literary text leads to reflection on the human condition, of incomplete beings, perpetually dissatisfied, since the desire, structurally, concerns a limited sexual pleasure, which brings the feeling always disappointing when compared to the inscribed ideal of completeness in the unconscious, from an early age.

These aspects do not cover the whole problem of desire in Psychoanalysis, however, it describes it, presenting its specificity and ability to elucidate enigmatic aspects of a concept of crucial importance in psychoanalytic theory and practice.

As a limitation, this review did not intend to exhaust the “*enigma of desire*”, for several aspects, even for the diversity of scientific areas that are interested in the theme. In turn, this dialogue between Psychoanalysis and Literature, inaugurated in the Freudian view and taken up by several scholars throughout psychoanalytic history, has also proved to be productive here and can be useful for research on psychoanalytic concepts.

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#### CONTRIBUTIONS

**Rita de Cássia Ramos** contributed to the study design, data analysis, writing and reviewing. **Paulo Rodrigo Unzer Falcade** participated in the orientation, writing and reviewing. **Araceli Albino** worked on reviewing.

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