

# PSYCHOLOGY AND LITERATURE: THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF ZENO BY ITALO SVEVO

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## Abstract

The present work aims to address the role that psychology plays within literary works starting from a "critical" reading aimed at understanding and recognizing the psychological and in some works also psychopathological traits present within the texts. Our goal will be to present the conscious and unconscious aspects of the various characters and identify the reasons that prompted the author to create and analyze certain psychological issues and certain environmental situations. The methodology that will be used will mainly be that indicated by Professor Antonio Fusco which aims and which tends to enhance the contribution of the Author's conscious Ego, of the emotional centers and of the unconscious contents of the mind following in part the line of the psychiatrist Silvano Arieti who in one of his main works illustrates the concept of "tertiary thinking" and sees it as a synthesis of unconscious, endoceptual and conceptual elements. [1]. The aspects that will allow you to better understand the facets of a literary work will be reading, knowledge of the author's biography and identifying with the characteristic features of the characters. On the relationship between mind, art, literature and psychoanalysis over time we have had numerous contributions from not only Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, but also many other authors. Just think of the various writers who have dealt with very important psychological and psychoanalytic themes through their novels; in the present work we will limit our attention to a psychological investigation of the work Zeno's conscience by Italo Svevo. Through the analysis of the characters and their inner life, it will be our task to be able to make the reader identify completely with the life described by the authors of the literary works. In this perspective, the psychologist will try to work alongside the traditional literary

critic with the sole propose of providing a further humble investigative contribution. In conclusion, it can be said that the thread that binds psychology to many literary works is very thin.

**Keywords:** Psychology - Literature - Art - Analysis - Literary Works.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Illness is a belief, and I was born with that belief.”*

The present work aims to address the role that psychology plays within literary works starting from a "critical" reading aimed at understanding and recognizing the psychological and in some works also psychopathological traits present within the texts. In the last ten years of the nineteenth century, modern sensibility began to become the object of psychiatry and psychology studies; the appearance of the crowd, the dissolution of the patriarchal family, the contagion of fashions, specialized work, imply behaviors, individual and collective, profoundly changed compared to the past, often not adequate and functional to the new dimensions of social coexistence. [2]. Together with psychological analysis, literature begins to increasingly reserve the field of intimate exploration, aiming to make the most secret inner resonances perceptible: the story, in particular, often occupies a thin line between normality and deviation, between health and disease, while psychic discomfort, diagnosed as "neurosis", is the new, widespread pathology from which Svevo is not immune. Before meeting Freud, he not only portrayed in his fiction characters suffering from deep inner disagreements, but he himself suffered them, starting therapies that contemplate writing as an effective form of treatment. In the field of psychoanalytic criticism, Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* was and remains a work of extraordinary importance. In this work, in fact, the intensity of the proximity of the field between psychoanalysis and literature is shown directly, by virtue of the conscious use that the author makes of Freud's concepts in writing the novel. It often happens to get lost in the maze of a story, in the life of the characters, identifying with every single trait that can make us think for a second about our thoughts, our emotions. *Zeno's Conscience* is a work that belongs to the psychological current, i.e. the type of novel that has as its main point the interiority of the characters who are described not only in their character but also in their mental and physical ones. In the psychological novel the facts and events are narrated in the first person, and the authors show characters who take refuge in memories of the past rather than continue. [3]. *Zeno's Conscience* is mainly characterized by a psychoanalytic matrix that proposes the narration of the facts as the result of the analytical work that the protagonist carries out on himself. *Zeno's Conscience* is a book that makes us think and rethink ourselves and our limits and the conclusion of the novel is profoundly modern; in fact, the vision of Zeno and therefore of Italo Svevo on Psychoanalysis affirms that it is discomfort that puts man in question with himself and with others.

## 2. TARGETS

This work aims to examine the psychological novel "Zeno's Consciousness" by Italo Svevo by presenting the conscious and unconscious aspects of the various characters and identifying the motivations that led the author to create and analyze certain psychological themes and certain environmental situations. The specific objectives of the research are:

1. Identify and analyze the conscious and unconscious aspects present in the novel and the psychological impact they have on readers.
2. Know and examine the significant traits of the various characters that follow one another within the novel.
3. Recognize and examine the most relevant and recurring themes and elements in the novel.
4. Study and analyze the psychological aspects of the protagonist Zeno and the relationships he establishes within the novel.
5. Identify the relational and communicative aspect that develops within the novel and how it evolves in the psychological aspect of the readers.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The investigation that we conducted took place through the reading of the novel "Zeno's Conscience" by Italo Svevo and the psychological analysis of the characters, so as to be able to arouse and stimulate in the readers a "critical" but at the same time positive attitude, towards reading and books, to stimulate their inner ego. The novel thus becomes the tool to address delicate and profound issues, questioning what lies within the person who is reading it. Zeno's Conscience, in particular, allows us to address the themes of illness, old age, loneliness and psychoanalysis, all in the form of irony. Psychological analysis follows the lines indicated by the Psychology of Art and Literature, a discipline whose founder in Italy can be considered Professor Antonio Fusco; studies the psychological motivations that led the author to create and produce a work, in this case the novel, and the situations and symbolic elements present in a verbal text like this. (Tomassoni, 2020). [4]. The novel Zeno's Conscience is characterized by the theme of Zeno's illness, which can be identified with his ineptitude, with his inability to be in the world and this leads the protagonist to undergo a course of psychoanalysis. Retracing the events of his life, the doctor hopes that Zeno will be able to remember the trauma that gave rise to his illness; the novel is divided into eight chapters, each of which focuses on the most intimate aspects of the protagonist. Everyone represents a journey to

discover the meanderings of Zeno's mind and at the same time transport the reader to "distant" worlds. The human mind is still seen today as something inexplicable, unattainable and difficult to understand. Zeno, through his stories, his psychoanalysis, makes us understand how very thin the thread that binds psychology to the human being is; each of us, within his life, has had difficult moments, inexplicable moments capable of wearing us down inside. Zeno represents the whole of what is often difficult to understand, perhaps because when it comes to topics such as illness, old age and loneliness, human beings tend to be afraid.



*"Life resembles a little disease as it proceeds by crises and lysis and has daily improvements and worsening's. Unlike other diseases, life is always fatal. He can't stand treatment." (Italo Svevo)*

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE PROTAGONIST

Zeno's Conscience, as we have already explained, is a psychoanalytic novel characterized by particular attention to the psyche of the protagonist, Zeno Cosini, an individual who feels ill and inept and is continually seeking a cure for his malaise through multiple attempts, sometimes absurd or counterproductive. It represents a point of cohesion between the thoughts, feelings, and fragility of the adult; somewhat taking up the Freudian theory of art which deals not only with the work itself but also with deep conflicts, neuroses, unconscious motivations understood as forces and impulses that characterize the content of the work and which led it to tell them. (Mastandrea, 2021). [5].

The novel presents itself as if it were the confession of Zeno Cosini, in fact the narration, carried out in the first person, does not follow a chronological order, but is articulated by focusing on the main events of Zeno's life: the order of events is therefore based on the relationship's analogues between

the remembered episodes. Zeno Cosini, the protagonist of the work, is a merchant who comes from a rich family, lives in idleness and has a conflictual relationship with his father, which will be reflected in his whole life. In love, in relationships with family and friends, in work, he experiences a constant sense of inadequacy and "ineptness", which he interprets as symptoms of an illness. The novel can be divided into three fundamental parts concerning Zeno's relationships with his family, with his wife's family and with his being alone. Zeno, in the physical manifestation of pain, actually psychic, asks for help and attention, the symptoms that appear together with the emotions are expressions of a psychotic disorder. During the meetings with Doctor S., Zeno tells of some dreams that have tormented him, which represent what he is unable to face. Both in the dream in which Ada appears and in the one in which her brother appears, there is a feeling of jealousy towards them. However, the most important and most relevant dream for Zeno, so much so that he defines it as a nightmare, sees him as the protagonist as a child alone and happy in a room (just like him in reality in Trieste) who feels the desire to eat a woman in pieces who appears in a lighted cage. The interpretation given by Doctor S., to this last dream, associates it with a desire to return to childhood, where everything for Zeno was simpler and at the same time associates it with the boundless love that he feels for Ada and that it will never change. Zeno's "illness" prevents him from identifying with the concrete world, but he nevertheless becomes aware of his imperfections; for this he is happy to change his own experiences. The other men, on the other hand, convinced that they are perfect, remain crystallized in a condition of immutability, that is they deny any possible improvement. The protagonist's healing process will therefore be largely based on an awareness of his own personality and will be realized in the acceptance of one's limits. Particularly interesting is the conception that Zeno has of himself in comparison with the other characters: he knows he is ill and considers the others "healthy", but precisely because the latter know they are "normal" they tend to remain crystallized in their state, while Zeno, restless, considers himself inept and for this reason he is willing to change and to experiment with "new forms of existence". Based on this conviction, he ends up reversing the relationship between health and illness: ineptitude is configured as an open condition, available to any form of development and consequently health is reduced to a defect, immutability. [6].

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Ineptitude is an ever-recurring element in Italo Svevo's literary works, anticipating a very topical theme such as man's sense of inadequacy within the society to which he belongs. The novel "La Coscienza di Zeno" by Italo Svevo aims to investigate deeply into the psyche of the protagonist himself, who had escaped the treatment that had been previously prescribed. However, Svevo loves

his illness, as he senses that it preserves him from the attrition of bourgeois society with its fictions and respectability and allows him to see reality in a more authentic way. [7].Speaking of psychology and literature we can say that both are united by parts that interact and influence each other and by common parts dealing with introspection, the unconscious, affections, desires, relationships and feelings. Finally, with respect to the close union between these two disciplines, we can sympathetically allude to the analysis held last century in England by the well-known psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion on the equally well-known scholar Samuel Beckett. This image is a precious metaphor that keeps psychology and literature together in the consulting room, facing each other in a saving dialogue. A space, a time, a relationship. The art of the psychoanalytic encounter.

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