



Medicine in Television Series

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The Sopranos and Psychoanalysis

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For many, this program is the pioneer of television's so-called "third golden age" (the first, heralded in by The Twilight Zone in the sixties while the second, by Hill Street Blues and St. Elsewhere, among others, in the eighties). In 1999, the inner turmoil of a New Jersey mafia boss launched a new epoch in television fiction, one which catapulted the cable chain HBO up to the highest standards of quality. Its six seasons, which ended in 2007 with five Golden Globes and 21 Emmys, also showered well-deserved recognition on the career spanning more than 30 years of its creator, David Chase.

Tony Soprano is nervous. He does not know where to sit when he enters the psychiatrist's office. "I shouldn't be here", he has written all over his face. It all began during a family barbecue when he fainted in front of his two families (his blood relations and his in-laws). The diagnosis: a panic attack. His doctor and neighbor suggested he visit a psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, who also conducts psychoanalysis.

Despite fainting episodes being highly unusual in panic attacks, we have to concede to the creators of The Sopranos that it is probably one of the TV series that has best portrayed modern psychoanalysis. Proof of this is recognition by the American Psychoanalytic Association, which awarded a prize to Lorraine Bracco, the actress who plays Tony's therapist, for having portrayed the most credible psychoanalyst appearing on film or television. The truth is, until then the image of the psychoanalyst had barely changed from what it was in the early twentieth century: a Sigmund Freud type smoking a pipe while a (hysterical) patient reclines on a divan, raving incessantly. Directors such as Woody Allen have not strayed very far from that more classical idea when portraying psychoanalysis on the big screen. So it is understandable that her "pop psychoanalyst" image was so out of step with the broader public (and despite her character, it remains so).

Dr. Melfi in The Sopranos puts things into perspective and shows us how this therapy has evolved. While psychologists in general have been adopting new techniques and even abandoned psychoanalysis as a valid method, for several years many psychiatrists have combined psychoanalysis with pharmacological treatments, treating the patient in quite a different way to their founding father's approach. For example, they push aside the divan and prefer to look their patient in the eyes, actively participating in the discussion.

In Dr. Melfi's psychiatrist's office we see the famous divan, but Tony will not lie on it. Nor will he begin to make associations of ideas while his therapist nods occasionally (or –that recurring gag– awaking with a start when the patient recalls their attention). In fact, one of the main problems with the psychiatric process is that Mr. Soprano is a difficult patient who does not want to speak, one of those who thinks he is constantly wasting time. An added difficulty is that, if anyone in his mafia environment finds out he is seeing a "shrink" (even worse, a "lady shrink"), it could be the end of his career as future *capo* of the New Jersey mafia. Tony is a challenge, but Melfi will insist; while she risks her professional pride, he may be risking his life.

One of the aims of any psychological therapy, above all psychoanalysis, is to get to the root of

the problem, so it is worth recapping history and going back to late-nineteenth-century Vienna, to the celebrated neurologist Sigmund Freud's consulting room, to understand what psychoanalysis is based on and what it aims to do. Freud defined the three aspects that comprise it as a discipline: it is a theoretical and explanatory model of emotions; it is a research method; and, lastly, it is a form of therapy. As a theory, Freud postulated that the pillars of psychoanalysis have a great deal to do with sexuality, stressing the well-known Oedipus complex, but also repression, resistance and the unconscious. In fact, some of the greatest criticisms, even schisms within psychoanalysis are due precisely to that excess of emphasis on the sexual question, which more than once Tony Soprano will hold up for comparison in his sessions.

But there is a theoretical model of the human psyche that did have a big impact, one crucial for understanding Freudian theory, and the case before us, the dilemmas and problems that wrack Tony. This is the psychological structure formed of the ego, the superego and the id, which act on three different levels: the conscious, the pre-conscious and the unconscious. A common metaphor that explains it more simply is the iceberg. The largest part is hidden underwater, corresponding to the unconscious and the pre-conscious, the latter sitting above the former. Only a small tip, the conscious, pokes above the surface. Meanwhile that iceberg is divided into three parts with different functions. On one side we have the id, completely submerged underwater, which is our most primitive, innate, undomesticated side, which exists to try and satiate our most basic desires, the so-called drives: hunger, sex or aggression. Then we have the superego, which is the largest part of the iceberg and is therefore almost completely submerged, though its head remains above water. The superego represents the moral and ethical thought that reaches us through our culture, and which is in constant struggle against the id, like a sort of moral guardian. Finally, we have the ego, which resembles an intermediary between the real world, the demands of the id and the superego. It is perhaps most similar to our self-awareness, our visible face. It would mainly

inhabit the tip of the iceberg, but not completely. The ego is the part of us that must balance the id's insatiable drives and the superego's morality, and it is where internal conflicts arise that lead one to seek consultation with a psychoanalyst.

To understand it better, we can return to Tony Soprano. We can see that his problems come precisely from that internal struggle between the different factions of his psyche. While in reality they do not appear outside his mind, we accept that in the series they become visible to viewers. His mafia side, that unscrupulous Tony, who is violent, promiscuous and a killer, that character with whom we cannot easily empathize, is the manifestation of the id, an uncontrolled id that neither his ego nor superego are capable of reining in. But then we have that other Tony, who is sympathetic, who sometimes truly loves his wife, who worries about his kids and wants to protect them from that world dominated by the id. That is where we see this character's ego, the story of a man who looks after his own and leads an apparently normal life. Yet his superego is there to remind him that how he earns his living is not good. That is when the internal conflict arises, causing those panic attacks. Naturally, such conflicts are fought on the unconscious plane, the demesne of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic techniques, which try to get all those submerged issues to rise to the surface.

On Sigmund Freud's divan, the subject would lie back without seeing the therapist so as not to feel observed, and begin speaking barely without interruption or restrictions of any kind. It is what is known as "free association of ideas". This is the principal psychoanalytic technique to encourage the patient to talk about anything entering their head, whether images, feelings, ideas, memories, etc. Sometimes, the therapist might suggest a topic to the patient, or encourage them to focus on their dreams, but in general they try not to suggest anything and topics arise spontaneously. Freud believed that this was the best way of reaching the id, the unconscious, and the freer the associations, the better the results would be. As mentioned, Dr. Melfi in *The Sopranos* is not a traditional psychoanalyst. In fact, probably few therapists still use free association of ideas in the



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purest sense. Yet traces remain in her approach, and we often see her intervene in response to one of Tony's comments in order to keep unraveling a thread, trying to follow the associations almost without realizing it. And had she not taken more of an active role, they probably would not have gone beyond a first session, in which the mafioso wonders where the strong and silent Gary Cooper types have gone. Historically, before arriving at free association of ideas, psychoanalysts used rather more complicated methods that, nowadays, are seen as quite unscientific. I am referring above all to hypnosis and the cathartic method, both of which were discarded once free association of ideas began to be used, since it was thought that the other methods were unable to break down the barriers of the unconscious. Nevertheless, within the concept of catharsis lies one of the theoretical and therapeutic pillars of psychoanalysis: the idea that to cure a patient one has to recall that traumatic moment that caused the discomfort, which that person has repressed and forgotten. This is an idea which fiction has used often to create a final climax, such as in Hitchcock's *Marnie*, a film in which psychoanalysis is likewise heavily present.

But if there is any place where our unconscious moves with as free a rein as most New Jersey gangsters, it is in the world of dreams. Dreams were one of the resources that the scriptwriters of *The Sopranos* used to get directly inside Tony's head, though they do not always make clear what each of the elements appearing signify. Why is it snowing? Why can we hear that constant creaking? What is Junior doing in that window? Why does he kill one of his most productive workers? Not even Tony has an explanation for the latter, so he asks Dr. Melfi: "Why would I do something like that?" According to Freud, dreams represent the realization of our desires, yet it is not so simple. Despite being asleep, our conscious is still awake, and is not willing to accept certain drives that come from the id. So the unconscious must camouflage such desires in some way in order to overcome our censorship, thereby utilizing the terrain of metaphor and symbolism.

The idea that dreams send us "camouflaged messages" has been used for many years to sell

us famous books on dream interpretation and, even if the content in most of these modern books is highly doubtful, it was Freud himself who in 1900 published a manual explicitly entitled *The Interpretation of Dreams (Die Traumdeutung)*. As mentioned, the sexual question was one of the pillars (not to say obsessions) in Freud's theories, and it seems he had a tendency to interpret many dreams from a festive or erotic viewpoint. However, the creators of *The Sopranos* were clear that, nowadays, not everything can be linked to sex. In the pilot episode, Tony explains one of his dreams, where he undoes a screw and his penis falls off. He goes, penis in hand, to visit the mechanic to get it put back in place, but a bird takes it and disappears. Beyond the supposedly clear sexual connection, the focus of attention is centered on that bird and what it came to symbolize in that episode. It is a moment of revelation (or call it a catharsis) when Tony becomes aware, among sobs, that one of his main problems is the fear of losing his family (as he lost the ducks that appeared at the beginning). So the episode closes, in a similar way to how Freud believed cases were closed, when the patient is able to discover what his or her problem is. And in the same manner as today's psychology believes that discovering the problem is simply the first step and then one must work on it, this is where the series truly starts.

In the first season, a moment arrives when Tony's mother finds out he is seeing a psychiatrist. Her first reaction, tremendously egocentric, but not necessarily erroneous, is to think that Tony is going to the psychiatrist to talk about her, to complain about his mother. This scene perfectly illustrates some of the clichés about psychoanalysis in which the wider public believe: If someone visits a mental health professional it is because when young they had problems with their mother. Once more, although psychology in general has gone substantially further than Freud, the influence he had on popular culture remains strong and retains its hold in the collective imagination. Part of the blame lies with one of his most famous (and most parodied) theories, although some of the merit should go to Greek mythology itself: the Oedipus complex was described for

the first time in his aforementioned manual *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Yet before discussing it, we should recap Freud's own theory on childhood sexual development, since he believed that right from birth children seek to satisfy their libido using different parts of their bodies. He divided the process into five stages: the oral, anal, phallic, latent and genital. It is the phallic stage (from three to six years old) when the so-called Oedipus complex develops, which is defined as the presence of feelings of hate and love towards the progenitors simultaneously. There can be two aspects: a positive Oedipus complex, in which the child feels hatred towards the progenitor of the same sex, and sexual attraction toward the opposite sex, and a negative complex, which is logically the inverse. In the phallic stage it is the male sexual organ that focuses the boy's interest, and it seems that, in the case of girls, the clitoris is also equivalent to a phallus. In this phase, the boy will feel sexual desire toward his mother, and thus supposed hatred for his father (the Oedipal tragedy), but by identifying with her and realizing that girls do not have penises, the only explanation that occurs to him is that women have been castrated. This fear of suffering the same fate leads him to abandon his incestuous desires and identify with the father (according to Freud, this is the logical path to follow). In the case of girls, they abandon their desire for their mother on believing that she is guilty of their castration (through her they realize that their clitoris will not grow like a penis), and from that fact, so-called "penis envy" arises, which will help them identify with their mother again, since she has access to one, the girl's father's (this is known as the Electra complex, which Freud's old colleague, Carl Jung, defined).

And if ever there were a tempestuous story between mother and son on television, few could beat that of Livia and her son Tony Soprano. Their relationship cannot be considered a clear example of the Oedipus complex, but no doubt it contains elements of the above. Firstly, Tony's feelings toward his mother are difficult to explain, since she is a sort of bitter ogre who since his childhood has maltreated her child (and some of the toughest scenes of that childhood are

based on the mother of the series creator, David Chase). Nevertheless, whether due to that Italian cultural heritage of the *Mamma* figure, or because that childhood desire postulated by Freud has not been fully overcome, Tony continues to worry about her and set her on a pedestal. He complains that it is his wife who refuses to bring her to live with them, which is supposedly what a good son should do. In fact, after talking about how complicated his mother is, he goes to visit her with a bunch of flowers. Some of the most heated lines in Melfi's office specifically concern questions relating to his mother and his incapacity to recognize that, as well as love, he also feels hatred toward her. Those who do seem to have taken these negative feelings toward his mother on board are Tony's sisters. Freud would explain such a rejection as them blaming his mother for their "castration". In this case, they would not have overcome the complex or moved on to identify with their mother. Bearing in mind Tony's older sister's mental instability, it is clear that some trauma remains unresolved.

The figure of the father, Johnny Soprano, is also worthy of analysis. Tony's identification with him is clear. During the series we see flashbacks of the relationship Tony establishes with him, midway between fear and admiration. From the psychoanalytic perspective, it is obvious that a significant problem exists in this relationship. Overcoming the Oedipus complex is considered necessary for the psyche's healthy functioning. It is supposedly at that moment when the superego is born –the moral force that declares incest is not good and boys should identify with the father, focusing on him. As mentioned, that is exactly what Tony does, but the problem lies in that his father is the root and symbol of all his current anguish. His father represents all those values, all those attitudes that now clash with the ego and superego. Added to all this is the figure of Corrado, Tony's uncle, who, in Melfi's office, takes on a paternal role for him even before his father's death: When Dr. Melfi asks him for memories of his father, one of the first that comes to mind is playing baseball with his uncle, not his progenitor. And is their relationship not tempestuous? Assassination attempts, subterfuge to win power...



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Another straw on the camel's back of Tony Soprano's Oedipal family drama.

Another interesting love story occurs in Melfi's office itself, from the first season, even from the pilot episode. Our protagonist shows signs of having noticed this psychiatrist and psychoanalyst of Italian heritage ("My mother would have loved it if you and I got together"). Dreams come into play again. He dreams of Melfi in bed, in the shower, and finally tries to kiss her in the psychiatrist's office. He ends up making a confession: "I love you. I'm in love with you. I'm sorry. ... I dream about you. ... I think about you all the time." To which she responds: "I know this may be very hard for you to swallow, but you're only feeling this way because we've made such progress... I've been a broad, generic sympathetic woman to you, because that's what this work calls for. You've made me all of the things you feel are missing in your wife... and in your mother." Tony insists: "You're makin' me out to be some mama's boy. I'm a man... and you're a woman. End of story. And this crap about Freud and every boy wanting to have sex with his mother... that's not gonna fly here. ... You don't want me to come back any more, fine." But Melfi assures him it is quite the opposite, that his confession is a byproduct of his progress. Beyond the comment on the Oedipus complex, and even beyond the lack of female affection that Tony seems to feel, this falling in love is the perfect excuse to speak of some of the phenomena associated with psychoanalytic therapy, in this specific case, transference.

Psychoanalytic therapy is a long process. It can last years. So a personal relationship is established with the therapist, somebody with whom profound, intense experiences and feelings are shared. In fact, psychoanalysts consider that in any relationship, one attributes libido to the other person, though they hasten to add that the term "libido" should not be interpreted sexually. In fact, they consider it necessary for the therapy to progress, since it is primordial that the patient trusts their therapist. From their side, the therapist must maintain an impassive, distant stance (whenever possible). And it is precisely that distance, the sparse information the

patient has about their therapist, that facilitates the transference process. According to modern psychoanalysts, the patient is transferring onto their therapist such feelings and experiences as they recall, of which they speak, and addressing that empty "vessel" which is their psychoanalyst, sometimes identifying them with their mother or father. The patient has not fallen in love with the therapist. The patient does not necessarily feel that their therapist substitutes their father or mother. The therapist is simply there at a moment when feelings arise, and therefore the therapist is the figure the patient addresses. As Dr. Melfi correctly states, this means the therapy is progressing. Tony has progressed in terms of the trust he has in her, so his feelings and lack of affection also begin to come to the fore. Caution is required, however, since the psychoanalyst must be capable of recognizing that transference (although for this psychoanalyst it was easy), and stopping it from going further. Will she manage this? I reveal no spoilers here.

Not everyone has praised Dr. Melfi: Some therapists have raised their hands in horror at certain details she reveals to Tony about her personal life, or for letting her control slip at times and losing that distance and impassiveness she should maintain. Yet others have seen in all this a reflection of the therapist's true reality, making Dr. Melfi much more believable and plausible than if the series had portrayed a textbook therapist. Psychoanalysts are not perfect, and neither is psychoanalysis. While it is probably the therapeutic technique/philosophical perspective on the human psyche best-known worldwide, it is also one of the most criticized. Currently, it does not even form part of the mandatory or core content of academic programs in Spanish psychology faculties. Psychoanalysis was rejected by many psychologists and psychiatrists decades ago (in fact, Freud himself experienced colleagues such as Jung disown some of his theories), and one of the main reasons is eminently practical. Psychoanalysis requires the patient to attend the consultancy for a long period of his or her life, years even, and that was considered inefficient. Neither was it ethical, since the patient's financial commitment was enormous.

Nevertheless, some critics would blame the decline in psychoanalysis in the late fifties and early sixties on drugs. In this, they are not referring exclusively to hallucinogenic drugs which “expanded one’s mind” in another direction (remember that Freud felt a certain attachment to cocaine), but to advances in pharmacological therapy. Here, the supposed benefit was almost instantaneous, making it unnecessary to spend months in therapy to begin noticing improvement. In fact, advances regarding the neurological origins of certain psychopathologies led psychology more toward the pill than the divan. In that period many of Freud’s theories were also discredited, and often his own patients’ cases, the ones leading him to formulate his theories, were questioned. Accusations of having forced memories out of his patients or interpreting what they told him in his own interest are criticisms that Freud and psychoanalysis have weathered since the start.

But despite everything, progress in this science, specifically neurobiology, seems to prove Freud partially right. Perhaps not in the interpretation and reasoning of some of his theories, but definitely in terms of certain basic ideas that psychoanalysis proposed in its time, especially regarding unconscious processes. So it is time to bring psychoanalysis up to date, in Dr. Melfi’s office, one that has no divan, and to discover psychoanalytical psychotherapy. Some of the practitioners of this new discipline, while recognizing that the origins and much of the method still owe a great deal to Freud, consider that current psychoanalysis is as different from the original as modern physics is to Newtonian physics. Remember that in its early days, the patient had no visual contact with the therapist, and the latter barely intervened in the discourse, except at specific moments to guide the patient a little. Moreover, from that moment on, the psychoanalyst was the maximum authority: he, rather than the patient, decided what was important or not. The

current approach considers that the therapeutic work is done together. It is a process that occurs by listening one to the other, both what the patient and the therapist have to say. The patient’s subjective reality is now relevant, so both parties work more on how she or he sees the world, not how the psychoanalyst believes things should be (that is why Melfi is constantly asking Tony what his dreams mean to him, what his feelings are). Psychoanalytical psychotherapy keeps seeking those unconscious processes that affect the patient’s life without the latter realizing, but is no longer exclusively related to neuroses or phobias, but can tackle the mental problems of our age (anxiety, depression, eating disorders, etc.). It is perhaps shallower work, therefore requiring fewer sessions, on problems that may be less specific. Nevertheless, the divan remains and, should the patient so require, they can delve deeper into their psyche.

The Sopranos is considered one of the best TV series of our times, one of the pioneers that wanted to take its format beyond that of a pure consumer product for filling television schedules. It was a series that was carefully produced in every detail, one with artistic pretensions. The care its creator took to create something special can be seen not merely in its manner of approaching its protagonist’s psychological therapy, which earned it the recognition of psychoanalysis professionals. One can truly say that the scriptwriters put in great effort, since four out of five of the main scriptwriters had undergone psychoanalysis. Many of the series viewers were simply interested in stories about gangsters, so perhaps they did not understand that the main story its creators wanted to tell was of Tony Soprano, his family and his therapy. However, when one analyzes the series from a more psychological viewpoint, one discovers many things that perhaps went unnoticed among so many beatings and killings. In the end, the part of the iceberg we can actually see is the smallest part.