

## Psychoanalytic literary theory:

Psychoanalytic literary theory is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis begun by Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalytic reading has been practiced since the early development of psychoanalysis itself, and has developed into a rich interpretive tradition.

### Basic Freudian Concepts:

The **unconscious** is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them.

The unconscious comes into being when we are very young through the *repression*.

Until we find a way to know and acknowledge to ourselves the true cause(s) of our repressed wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts, we hang onto them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways.

Defenses are the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious. In other words, they are the processes by which we keep the repressed repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel we can't handle knowing. Defenses include **selective perception** (hearing and seeing only what we feel we can handle), **selective memory** (modifying our memories so that we don't feel overwhelmed by them or forgetting painful events entirely), **denial** (believing that the problem doesn't exist or the unpleasant incident never happened), **avoidance** (staying away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious—i.e., repressed—experience or emotion), **displacement** (“taking it out” on someone or something less threatening than the person who caused our fear, hurt, frustration, or anger), and **projection** (ascribing our fear, problem, or guilty desire to someone else and then condemning him or her for it, in order to deny that we have it ourselves).

Perhaps one of the most complex defenses is **regression**, the temporary return to a former psychological state, which is not just imagined but relived. Regression can involve a return either to a painful or a pleasant experience. It is a defense because it carries our thoughts away from some present difficulty sometimes our defenses momentarily break down, and this is when we experience **anxiety**. Anxiety can be an important experience because it can reveal our **core issues**.

We begin our discussion of core issues and their relationship to anxiety with some examples of the more common core issues :

**Fear of intimacy**—the chronic and overpowering feeling that emotional closeness will seriously hurt or destroy us and that we can remain emotionally safe only by remaining at an emotional distance from others at all times. Fear of intimacy can also function as a defense. If this particular defense occurs frequently or continually, then fear of intimacy is probably a core issue.

**Fear of abandonment**—the unshakable belief that our friends and loved ones are going to desert us (physical abandonment) or don't really care about us (emotional abandonment).

**Fear of betrayal**—the nagging feeling that our friends and loved ones can't be trusted, for example, can't be trusted not to lie to us, not to laugh at us behind our backs,

**Low self-esteem**—the belief that we are less worthy than other people and, therefore, don't deserve attention, love, or any other of life's rewards.

**Insecure or unstable sense of self**—the inability to sustain a feeling of personal identity, to sustain a sense of knowing ourselves. This core issue makes us very vulnerable to the influence of other people, and we may find ourselves continually changing the way we look or behave as we become involved with different individuals or groups.

**Oedipal fixation (or oedipal complex)**—a dysfunctional bond with a parent of the opposite sex that we don't outgrow in adulthood and that doesn't allow us to develop mature relationships with our peers.

### **Dreams and dream symbols**

When we sleep, it is believed that our defenses do not operate in the same manner they do when we are awake. During sleep, the unconscious is free to express itself, and it does so in our dreams. However, even in our dreams there is some censorship, some protection against frightening insights into our repressed experiences and emotions, and that protection takes the form of dream distortion. The “message” our unconscious expresses in our dreams, which is the dream's underlying meaning, or *latent content*

Freud maintained that our desires and our unconscious conflicts give rise to three areas of the mind that wrestle for dominance as we grow from infancy, to childhood, to adulthood:

### **The id: Meeting Basic Needs**

The Id is the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche which responds directly and immediately to the instincts.

The id demands immediate satisfaction and when this happens we experience pleasure, when it is denied we experience ‘unpleasure’ or pain. The id is not affected by reality, logic or the everyday world.

On the contrary, it operates on the **pleasure principle** which is the idea that every wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences.

### **Examples:**

- Sally was thirsty. Rather than waiting for the server to refill her glass of water, she reached across the table and drank from Mr. Smith's water glass, much to his surprise.
- Bart was stuck in traffic. He just wanted his vehicle to move! Enraged at the situation, Bart pulled his car and sped forward, not caring that he was clipping people's side mirrors as he tried to get ahead of the cars in front of him.

### **Ego: dealing with Reality**

The ego deals with reality, trying to meet the desires of the id in a way that is socially acceptable in the world. The ego recognizes that other people have needs and wants too, and that being selfish is not always good for us in the long run.

Eg: Sally was thirsty. However, she knew that her server would be back soon to refill her water glass, so she waited until then to get a drink, even though she really just wanted to drink from Mr. Smith's glass.

## **Superego: Adding Morals**

The superego develops last, and is based on morals and judgments about right and wrong. Even though the superego and the ego may reach the same decision about something, the superego's reason for that decision is more based on moral values, while the ego's decision is based more on what others will think or what the consequences of an action could be.

The superego's function is to control the id's impulses, especially those which society forbids. It also has the function of persuading the ego to turn to moralistic goals rather than simply realistic ones and to strive for perfection.

The superego consists of two systems: The **conscience** and the **ideal self**. The conscience can punish the ego through causing feelings of guilt. For example, if the ego gives in to id demands, the superego may make the person feel bad though guilt.

The ideal self (or ego-ideal) is an imaginary picture of how you ought to be, and represents career aspirations, how to treat other people, and how to behavior as a member of society.

Behavior which falls short of the ideal self may be punished by the superego through guilt. The super-ego can also reward us through the ideal self when we behave 'properly' by making us feel proud.

If a person's ideal self is too high a standard, then whatever the person does will represent failure. The ideal self and conscience are largely determined in childhood from parental values and you were brought up.

### **Examples:**

□ Sarah knew that she could steal the supplies from work and no one would know about it. However, she knew that stealing was wrong, so she decided not to take anything even though she would probably never get caught.

□ While away on business, Tom had many opportunities to be unfaithful to his wife. However, he knew the damage such behavior would have on his family, so made the decision to avoid the women who had expressed interest in him.

The id, ego and superego work together in creating a behavior. The id creates the demands, the ego adds the needs of reality with the superego adds morality to the action which is taken.

Freud believed that the impact of the unconscious, id, ego, superego and the Oedipus complexes was inescapable and that these elements of the mind influence all our behavior (and even our dreams) as adults.

## Freud and Literature:

Freud's notion of the unconscious and the relationship between dreams and repression to the artistic process served to establish develop psychoanalytic theory.

In the psychoanalytic approach, critics see the text as if it were a kind of dream. This means that the text represses its real (or latent) content behind obvious (manifest) content. The process of changing from latent to manifest content is known as the dream work. The critic analyzes the language and symbolism of a text to reverse the process of the dream work and arrive at the underlying latent thoughts.

1. How do the operations of repression structure or inform the work? That is, what unconscious motives are operating in the main character(s); what core issues are thereby illustrated; and how do these core issues structure or inform the piece? (Remember, the unconscious consists of repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts, and guilty desires.)
2. Are there any oedipal dynamics—or any other family dynamics—at work here? That is, is it possible to relate a character's patterns of adult behavior to early experiences in the family as represented in the story? How do these patterns of behavior and family dynamics operate and what do they reveal?
3. How can characters' behavior, narrative events, and/or images be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (for example, regression, crisis, projection, fear of or fascination with death, sexuality—which includes love and romance as well as sexual behavior—as a primary indicator of psychological identity, or the operations of ego-id-superego)?
4. In what ways can we view a literary work as analogous to a dream? That is, how might recurrent or striking dream symbols reveal the ways in which the narrator or speaker is projecting his or her unconscious desires, fears, wounds, or unresolved conflicts onto other characters, onto the setting, or onto the events portrayed? Symbols relevant to death, sexuality, and the unconscious are especially helpful. Indeed, the use of dream symbols can be very useful in interpreting literary works, or passages thereof, that seem unrealistic or fantastic, in other words, that seem dreamlike.
5. What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author? Although this question is no longer the primary question asked by psychoanalytic critics, some critics still address it, especially those who write psychological biographies (psychobiographies). In these cases, the literary text is interpreted much as if it were the author's dream. Psychoanalyzing an author in this manner is a difficult undertaking, and our analysis must be carefully derived by examining the author's entire corpus as well as letters, diaries, and any other biographical material available. Certainly, a single literary work can provide but a very incomplete picture.
6. What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader? Or what might a critical trend suggest about the psychological motives of a group of readers (for example, the tendency of literary critics to see Willy Loman as a devoted family man and ignore or underplay his contribution to the family dysfunction)?

