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Psychoanalysis

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Put simply, psychoanalysis is a theory that focuses on the dynamic relationship between the body, mind and social order. This theory was first developed in the work of Sigmund Freud, a psychologist who ran a medical practice in Vienna from 1886 up until his death in 1939. Whilst the popular myth suggests that psychoanalysis is 'all about sex', Freud in fact studied and wrote about a range of subjects that included religion (in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939)), occultism (in *Totem and Taboo* (1913)), trauma (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)) and humour (in *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905)). Freud was not fixated on one subject, however, it is true to say that sexuality is central to much psychoanalytical thinking about the self, the family and society. Even if you do not agree with psychoanalysis (and many have their doubts) it is still necessary to recognise the huge impact of Freud's theories on western culture from the arts and academic disciplines to advertising and popular culture.

Perhaps *the* key concept underpinning psychoanalysis is the 'unconscious', or 'id', which Freud defined this as 'the dark, inaccessible part of our personality' (Freud 1953-73, vol.22, 328). According to this model there are parts of the mind - thoughts, desires and memories – that we cannot access but which nonetheless shape our identity and behaviour. To explain the development of the unconscious Freud went back to the beginning. From the moment of our birth and then throughout infancy, psychoanalysis contends that we are governed by the 'pleasure principle'. The infant seeks only to obtain pleasure and this search for physical gratification inevitably centres upon her own body. Subsequently, as the child develops, she has to learn to give up the desire for immediate gratification. Society demands that we control our desires. The pleasure principle is repressed by what Freud termed the 'reality principle'. However, the story does not end here because desire is unruly. Repressed wishes do not simply disappear. Desires which have been denied reside in the unconscious and if too much sexual energy is repressed the subject can become mentally ill or 'neurotic'. Freud developed psychoanalysis as a tool which, he hoped, could cure mental illness, explain sexual development and shed light on

the 'dark [and] inaccessible' parts of the mind. To achieve these goals the psychoanalyst focuses intently on language. Psychoanalysis is a form of 'talking cure'. The patient is encouraged to articulate their problems, to engage in word play (so-called 'free association') and to talk about their dreams. For Freud, dreams were the 'royal road' to the unconscious. A dream is the imaginary dramatisation of wishes and fears that have been repressed in the waking world. According to Freud, the dream offers a complex code of images and symbols that has to be deciphered. The dream has a 'manifest content' (what we remember and narrate when awake) and a latent content (the secret meaning of these stories).

Because of its focus on language, story-telling and symbols, psychoanalysis lends itself to literary studies. The psychoanalyst offers close readings of the meaning hidden in the 'texts' offered by the patient when they talk about their feelings, their relationships and their dreams, or if they use one word when they intended to use another (the so-called 'Freudian slip'). Like many literary critics, the psychoanalyst suspects that deeper meanings are often hidden but can be uncovered by the work of interpretation. An excellent introduction to the twin practices of psychoanalysis and literary criticism is provided by Freud's own essay, 'The Uncanny' (1919). Here you will find Freud exploring the etymology of his keyword – 'uncanny', or *unheimlich* in German – alongside a reading of Hoffmann's gothic short story, 'The Sandman' (1816). Freud's work has inspired many literary critics and psychoanalytical concepts have been used to analyse authors, characters in novels and plays, literary language and history. For an introduction to one of the more rudimentary forms of psychoanalytical reading you might consult readings of 'In Winter in my Room' by the nineteenth century American poet, Emily Dickinson. This poem begins as follows:

In Winter in my Room –
I came upon a Worm –
Pink, lank and warm –

Following this discovery the female persona in the poem attempts to tie the worm up with string only for it to transform magically into a snake 'ringed with power'. In the poem's closing line this episode is revealed as a 'dream'. Practically every critical

encounter with this poem has focused on its sexual symbolism. The 'worm/snake' has been interpreted as a phallic symbol which signifies the poet's 'penis envy' and repressed heterosexual desire, but also as a dream image that expresses her fear of and hostility towards male sexuality. In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia underlines the extent to which psychoanalysis has become common currency, by suggesting that '[a]fter Freud, this poem would be unwritable, except by a child or psychotic. Its unself-conscious clarity is astounding' (Paglia, 2001, 644).

Only a relatively small percentage of psychoanalytical critics content themselves by playing 'hunt the phallus'! If you develop your understanding of this critical approach it will become clear that psychoanalysis is a broad church. Freudian, or 'classical' psychoanalysis has been critiqued and developed and integrated with other critical approaches. Whilst Freud focused predominantly on the 'Oedipal' phase of development (typically between three to five years), his contemporary Melanie Klein concentrated on the formative significance of the pre-Oedipal phase (infancy). Klein proposed that one's earliest experiences with the mother's body formed a template for all future relationships and her 'object relations theory' provided a platform for the development of feminist psychoanalysis. Without doubt the most significant revision of classical psychoanalysis was conducted by Jacques Lacan. Lacanian psychoanalysis combines Freudian theory with Saussurean linguistics and insists on the critical role played by language in our social and sexual development. Lacan's work is both highly influential and notoriously difficult so you would be well-advised to begin your investigation with an introductory guide. In addition to feminism and linguistics, psychoanalysis has also been joined with marxist theory and has played a critical role in the evolution of gay and lesbian studies and film theory. For recommendations on where to begin your analysis of psychoanalysis, please see the 'further reading' section below.

Further Reading

Freud, Sigmund (1953-73), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 volumes. London: Hogarth Press.

Freud is one of the architects of modern thinking and the serious student of psychoanalysis will find fruitful and stimulating material throughout the *Complete Works*. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, vol.5) would make a propitious starting-point for its introduction of key concepts such as the 'ego', 'repression', 'dream-work' and the 'unconscious'.

Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London: Routledge.

Butler engages, often critically, with Freud and Lacan to develop a model of gender as a 'performance'. Butler's model has had a major impact on literary criticism.

Klein, Melanie (1985), *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Edited by Juliet Mitchell.

A serviceable introduction to the figure whose work informs and inspires much of the feminist revision of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Kristeva, Julia (1982), *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York. Columbia University Press.

For students working on gothic literature Kristeva's exploration of the abject is now compulsory. *Powers of Horror* seeks to explain how fear and disgust are connected to the breakdown in meaning which results when the distance is closed between self and other, subject and object.

Lacan, Jacques (2007), *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York. Norton.

It is difficult to overestimate Lacan's contribution to post-Freudian psychoanalysis. For those new to his work the following essays are recommended as a relatively gentle initiation: 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' and 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud'.

Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J.B (1973), *The Language of Psycho-analysis*. London: Hogarth.

The definitive reference work and an indispensable resource for the student of psychoanalysis.

Ellmann, Maud (1994), *Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism*. London: Longman.

Felman, Shoshana (ed.) (1977), *Psychoanalysis and Literature: the Question of Reading, Otherwise*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Homer, Sean (2004), *Jacques Lacan*. London & New York. Routledge.

Kofman, Sarah (1990), *Freud and Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mitchell, Juliet (1975), *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mulvey, Laura (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This volume includes the seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze is essential reading for students of visual culture and should also prove advantageous for cognate literary study.

Pep-web.org

Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing. 'A fully searchable digital archive of classic psychoanalytical texts'.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York. Columbia University Press.

One of the founding texts for queer theory.

Thurschwell, Pamela (2001), *Sigmund Freud*. London & New York: Routledge.

Wright, Elizabeth (1998), *Psychoanalytical Criticism: A Reappraisal*. Oxford: Polity.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006), *How to Read Lacan*. London: Granta.