

English 2332: Brit/World Lit.  
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# LITERARY CRITICISM

The paradigms and the possibilities—



- ▶ **Psychoanalytical Criticism** shows how human behavior is relevant to our experience of literature
- ▶ Overall, the main goal of **psychoanalysis** is to understand **human behavior**. By using the same process, literary critics on the other hand can understand the complexities of literary texts, which in themselves are about human behavior and understanding the human condition

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM *DEFINITION*

- ▶ The goal of psychoanalysis is to help us resolve our psychological problems (called disorders or dysfunctions).
- ▶ Psychoanalysts focus on correcting patterns of behavior that are destructive.
- ▶ One of Freud's most radical insights was the notion that human beings are motivated by unconscious desires, fears, needs, and conflicts.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### *FREUD'S THEORIES*

- ▶ The unconscious is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about.
- ▶ We develop our unconscious mind at a very young age through the act of repression.
- ▶ Repression is the expunging of the conscious mind of all our unhappy psychological events.
- ▶ Our unhappy memories do not disappear in the unconscious mind; rather, they exist as a dynamic entity that influences our behavior.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### *WHAT IS THE UNCONSCIOUS?*

- ▶ **The Oedipus Complex:** young boys between the ages of 3-6 develop a sexual attachment to their mothers. The young boy competes with his father for his mother's attention until he passes through the castration complex, which is when he abandons his desire for his mother out of fear of castration by his father.
- ▶ Psychoanalysts focus on correcting patterns of behavior that are destructive.
- ▶ Freud believed all children must successfully pass through these stages in order to develop normally. Freud also believed that a child's moral sensibility and conscience appear for the first time during this stage.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### *FAMILY CRISIS*

- ▶ Our **defense mechanisms** do not operate in the same way while we are asleep as they do when we are awake. This is why psychoanalysts are so interested in **dream analysis**.
- ▶ When we are asleep, the unconscious mind is free to express itself and it does so in the form of dreams.
- ▶ Dream displacement: when we use a “safe” person, event, or object as a “stand-in” to represent a more threatening person, event, or object.
- ▶ For example, dreaming about a child almost always reveals something about our feelings toward ourselves, toward the child that is still within us and that is probably still wounded in some way.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### *DREAMS*

- ▶ **Death** is a difficult subject to analyze, often because we have a tendency to treat death as an abstraction.
- ▶ By treating death as an **abstract idea**, we can theorize about it without feeling its force too intimately because its force is much too frightening.
- ▶ Freud theorized that death is a biological drive which he referred to as the “death drive.”
- ▶ The “death drive” theory accounted for the alarming degree of self-destructive behavior Freud observed in individuals.
- ▶ Our fear of death is closely tied to our fear of being alone, our fear of abandonment, and our fear of intimacy.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### *DEATH*

- ▶ **Sexual behavior** is a product of our culture because our culture sets down the rules of proper sexual conduct and the definitions of normal/abnormal sexual behavior
- ▶ **Society's rules and definitions** concerning sexuality form a large part of our **superego**. The word superego implies feeling guilty (even though some of the time we shouldn't) because we are socially programmed to feel guilty when we break a social value (pre-marital sex, for example).

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### SEX



- ▶ **The superego** is in direct opposition to the **id**, the psychoanalytical reservoir our instincts and **libido**. The id is devoted to gratifying all our prohibited desires (sex, power, amusement, food, etc.)
- ▶ Because the **id** contains desires regulated or forbidden by social convention, the **superego** determines which desires the id will contain
- ▶ The **ego** plays referee between the id and the superego; it is the product of the conflict we feel between what we desire and what society tells us we cannot have.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### SEX

- ▶ The job of the psychoanalytical critic is to see which concepts are operating in the text that will yield a meaningful psychoanalytic interpretation. For example:
- ▶ You might focus on the work's representation of oedipal dynamic of family dynamics in general.
- ▶ You might focus on what work tells us about human beings' psychological relationship to death or sexuality.
- ▶ You might focus on how the narrator's unconscious problems keep appearing over the course of the story.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

### *READING A TEXT*

- ▶ A great way to practice psychoanalytical criticism is to analyze the behavior of the characters in the text.
- ▶ Often the characters' behavior represents the psychological experience of the author or of human beings in general.
- ▶ A good example would be a psychoanalytical reading of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM ANALYZE A CHARACTER

- ▶ To some extent, all creative works are a product of the author's **conscious** and/or **unconscious** mind.
- ▶ Any human production that involves images, that seems to have narrative content, or relates for the psychology of those who produce or use it can be interpreted using psychoanalytic tools.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM  
*KEEP IN MIND*

- ▶ What unconscious motives are operating in the main characters?  
What is being repressed?
- ▶ Remember that the unconscious mind consists of repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts, and guilty desires
- ▶ Is it possible to relate a character's patterns of adult behavior to early experiences in the family (as represented in the story)?
- ▶ What do these behavior patterns and family dynamics reveal?

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM *IMPORTANT QUESTIONS*

- ▶ How can
  - characters' behavior
  - narrative events
  - images supplied in textexplain in terms of regression, projection, fear of or fascination with **death** or **sexuality**?

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM *IMPORTANT QUESTIONS*

- ▶ In what ways can we view a literary work as a **dream**? How might recurrent or striking dream symbols reveal the ways in which the narrator/author is projecting his unconscious desires, fears, wounds, or unresolved conflicts onto other characters or the events portrayed?
- ▶ Look for **symbols** relevant to death and sexuality (yonic and phallic symbols).

## PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM *IMPORTANT QUESTIONS*