Psychoanalytic Criticism (1930s-present)

Sigmund Freud

Psychoanalytic criticism builds on Freudian theories of psychology. While we don't have the room here to discuss all of Freud's work, a general overview is necessary to explain psychoanalytic literary criticism.

The Unconscious, the Desires, and the Defenses

Freud began his psychoanalytic work in the 1880s while attempting to treat behavioral disorders in his Viennese patients. He dubbed the disorders 'hysteria' and began treating them by listening to his patients talk through their problems. Based on this work, Freud asserted that people's behavior is affected by their unconscious: "...the notion that human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware..." (Tyson 14-15).

Freud believed that our unconscious was influenced by childhood events. Freud organized these events into developmental stages involving relationships with parents and drives of desire and pleasure where children focus "...on different parts of the body...starting with the mouth...shifting to the oral, anal, and phallic phases..." (Richter 1015). These stages reflect base levels of desire, but they also involve fear of loss (loss of genitals, loss of affection from parents, loss of life) and repression: "...the expunging from consciousness of these unhappy psychological events" (Tyson 15).

Tyson reminds us, however, that "...repression doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions...we unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to 'play out'...our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress" (15). To keep all of this conflict buried in our unconscious, Freud argued that we develop defenses: selective perception, selective memory, denial, displacement, projection, regression, fear of intimacy, and fear of death, among others.

Id, Ego, and Superego

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:

- id - "...the location of the drives" or libido
- ego - "...one of the major defenses against the power of the drives..." and home of the defenses listed above
- superego - the area of the unconscious that houses Judgment (of self and others) and "...which begins to form during childhood as a result of the Oedipus complex" (Richter 1015-1016)

Oedipus Complex

Freud believed that the Oedipus complex was "...one of the most powerfully determinative elements in the growth of the child" (Richter 1016). Essentially, the Oedipus complex involves children's need for their parents and the conflict that arises as children mature and realize they are not the absolute focus of their mother's attention: "the Oedipus complex begins in a late phase of infantile sexuality, between the child's third and sixth year, and it takes a different form in males than it does in females" (Richter 1016).

Freud argued that both boys and girls wish to possess their mothers, but as they grow older "...they begin to sense that their claim to exclusive attention is thwarted by the mother's attention to the father..." (1016). Children, Freud maintained, connect this conflict of attention to the intimate
relations between mother and father, relations from which the children are excluded. Freud believed that "the result is a murderous rage against the father...and a desire to possess the mother" (1016).

Freud pointed out, however, that "...the Oedipus complex differs in boys and girls...the functioning of the related castration complex" (1016). In short, Freud thought that "...during the Oedipal rivalry [between boys and their fathers], boys fantasized that punishment for their rage will take the form of..." castration (1016). When boys effectively work through this anxiety, Freud argued, "...the boy learns to identify with the father in the hope of someday possessing a woman like his mother. In girls, the castration complex does not take the form of anxiety...the result is a frustrated rage in which the girl shifts her sexual desire from the mother to the father" (1016).

Freud believed that eventually, the girl's spurned advanced toward the father give way to a desire to possess a man like her father later in life. Freud believed that the impact of the unconscious, id, ego, superego, the defenses, and the Oedipus complexes was inescapable and that these elements of the mind influence all our behavior (and even our dreams) as adults - of course this behavior involves what we write.

**Freud and Literature**

So what does all of this psychological business have to do with literature and the study of literature? Put simply, some critics believe that we can "...read psychoanalytically...to see which concepts are operating in the text in such a way as to enrich our understanding of the work and, if we plan to write a paper about it, to yield a meaningful, coherent psychoanalytic interpretation" (Tyson 29). Tyson provides some insightful and applicable questions to help guide our understanding of psychoanalytic criticism.

**Typical questions:**

- How do the operations of repression structure or inform the work?
- Are there any oedipal dynamics - or any other family dynamics - are work here?
- How can characters' behavior, narrative events, and/or images be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (for example...fear 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)?
- What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author?
- What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader?
- Are there prominent words in the piece that could have different or hidden meanings? Could there be a subconscious reason for the author using these "problem words"?

Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory:

- Peter Brooks
- Julia Kristeva - *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984
- Marshall Alcorn - *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire*, 2002
Carl Jung

Jungian criticism attempts to explore the connection between literature and what Carl Jung (a student of Freud) called the “collective unconscious” of the human race: "...racial memory, through which the spirit of the whole human species manifests itself" (Richter 504). Jungian criticism, closely related to Freudian theory because of its connection to psychoanalysis, assumes that all stories and symbols are based on mythic models from mankind’s past.

Based on these commonalities, Jung developed archetypal myths, the Syzygy: "...a quaternion composing a whole, the unified self of which people are in search" (Richter 505). These archetypes are the Shadow, the Anima, the Animus, and the Spirit: "...beneath...[the Shadow] is the Anima, the feminine side of the male Self, and the Animus, the corresponding masculine side of the female Self" (Richter 505).

In literary analysis, a Jungian critic would look for archetypes (also see the discussion of Northrop Frye in the Structuralism section) in creative works: "Jungian criticism is generally involved with a search for the embodiment of these symbols within particular works of art." (Richter 505). When dealing with this sort of criticism, it is often useful to keep a handbook of mythology and a dictionary of symbols on hand.

Typical questions:

- What connections can we make between elements of the text and the archetypes? (Mask, Shadow, Anima, Animus)
- How do the characters in the text mirror the archetypal figures? (Great Mother or nurturing Mother, Whore, destroying Crone, Lover, Destroying Angel)
- How does the text mirror the archetypal narrative patterns? (Quest, Night-Sea-Journey)
- How symbolic is the imagery in the work?
- How does the protagonist reflect the hero of myth?
- Does the “hero” embark on a journey in either a physical or spiritual sense?
- Is there a journey to an underworld or land of the dead?
- What trials or ordeals does the protagonist face? What is the reward for overcoming them?

Here is a list of scholars we encourage you to explore to further your understanding of this theory:

- Maud Bodkin - Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, 1934
- Richard Sugg - Jungian Literary Criticism, 1993

SOURCE: