Group 1:
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
- Ricahrd Sugg - *Jungian Literary Criticism*, 1993
Jacques Lacan

*This part is added by Oualline and is not part of *The Owl’s* original article on “Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism”*

Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, revised and updated Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis and “shifts the description of mental processes from a purely biological model to a semiotic one” (Richter 633). His view of childhood development centers on the idea that we all experience a sense of something absent, a sense of “lack” that we try to fill or a need that our psyche demands.

**Lacanian Stages of Development**

**The Real (0-6 months):** Lacan’s Real is a sense of completeness with no absence or lack. In the Real, all needs are satisfied and there is complete unity and fullness. We can never achieve this, but the closest we get is when we are first born and we feel a sense of completeness or oneness with our mother. There is no sense of self or other because the child feels connected with the mother.

**The Imaginary Stage (2-6 months):** The child begins to crave attention and love. During this stage, the baby begins to develop a sense of the mother as being separate from themselves. Realizing that there are others in the world that are not them creates an anxiety and a sense of loss. The child begins to demand unity, a reunion with the other, but that desire cannot be filled. This stage is called imaginary because the child begins to develop images.

**The Mirror Stage (6-18 months):** The child recognizes the reflection of him/herself in the mirror and finds pleasure in this realization. Before this, the child was only a fragment (arm, leg, foot) while others were whole. In this stage, the child begins to see and imagine and anticipate him/herself as a whole being. The child had already created a sense of other in the imaginary stage, but now the child has a sense of self. However, this image of the self is merely an illusion. We can’t really know a complete self, so we construct an idea of completeness. The self is always a fantasy because it is an identification with an image. This causes a split in the child between the insufficient, fragmented self and the Ideal-I, the constructed image of completeness.

**The Desire Stage:** The child has what Lacan calls *Le desir de la mere*, which is both the desire OF the mother and the desire FOR the mother. The child longs to merge or become one with the mother, to get rid of the self/other split in order to fill the lack (for both the mother and him/herself).

**The Symbolic Order:** The ultimate loss or lack comes from moving into language, so once we are able to speak, we enter the Symbolic Realm. The imaginary gets oppressed and we are cut off from oneness with the mother (desire for her, and also for the original oneness of the Real) by what Lacan calls *Le nom du pere* (a play on words that can mean both the NO of the Father and the NAME of the father). Once we have language, all the things outside of language become the unspeakable. We know we have lost something, but we don’t know what it is we have lost. Therefore, we can never truly know our desire, so we keep trying fulfill our desires with different things. However, language is the ultimate lack, so there is no fulfillment in the symbolic realm.

**Analyzing Literature with Lacanian Psychoanalysis:**

- Look at the ways the stages of development are represented in literature (Imaginary, Mirror Stage)
- Moving from a feeling of oneness to being alienated
- Movement from language to images (from the symbolic back to the imaginary)
- Fascination with Death (death wish)
- Desire for oneness
- A fragmented self, or an attempt to create a sense or image of completeness from the fragments
- A representation of desire for the mother/Other

**Reference:**