

Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism Worksheet

When using psychoanalytic literary criticism to analyze literature and movies focus on Freud's major theories:

1. One of Freud's most radical insights was the notion that human beings are **motivated by unconscious desires, fears, needs, and conflicts**. The unconscious mind is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we don't want to deal with.

The subconscious mind develops at a very early age through **repression**. Our unhappy memories are periodically cleaned from the conscious mind, and stored in the subconscious mind, where they influence our behavior in ways that are unconscious to us.

- 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.
 - How are the POV character's subconscious problems repetitively appearing over the course of the story?
 - What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader? For example, if a group of critics see Willy Loman as a devoted family man while underplaying his contribution to the family dysfunction, what might that say about the repressive tendencies of that group of critics? Maybe acknowledging Willy Loman's faults as a bad father and husband forces the reader to acknowledge similar faults in his/her own father?
2. When we're asleep, the **subconscious mind talks** to the conscious mind **in the language of images**. In dream displacement 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 deep within, and that is still wounded in some way.
 - 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). What do these symbols tell you about the dynamic between the characters?
3. Freud believed all children must successfully pass through Oedipal/Electra phase to develop a normal moral sensibility.
- **The Oedipus Complex:** Boys ages 3-6 yo compete with his father for his mother’s attention until he abandons his desire for his mother out of fear of castration by his father.
 - **The Electra Complex:** young girls compete with their mothers for the affection of their fathers.
 - 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?
4. Freud observed an alarming degree of self-destructive behavior. He theorized that humans have a biological “**death drive**.”
- Our fear of death is closely linked to our fear intimacy, abandonment, and being alone.
 - Are the characters of the story coming to terms with death or sexuality?

- How can characters' behavior, narrative events, and/or images be explained in terms of regression, projection, fear of or fascination with death or sexuality?
5. Freud divided the psyche into three entities: The **ego**, the **super ego**, and the **id**.
- The id represents our desires, instincts, and libido. The id is devoted to gratifying all our forbidden desires (sex, power, amusement, food, etc.)
 - The super-ego represents the rules and taboos we've internalized from our culture. Society's rules and definitions concerning sexuality form a large part of our superego. We are socially programmed to feel guilty when we break a social value.
 - As the id drives our behavior using pleasure, the superego puts limits on our behavior using guilt.
 - Ego is the product of the conflict we feel between what we desire and what society tells us we cannot have. The ego mediates between the id and the superego and chooses our actual behavior.
 - Do any of the characters seem conflicted about a societal norm?
 - Does any character show a desire for something taboo?
 - How are these characters coping with their forbidden perspective?