

An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

Psychoanalytical Criticism

✓ Psychoanalytical Theory Explained

- Reference to the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work.
- The psychology of a character or the author is analyzed to figure out the meaning of the text.
- In reading literature, we can make educated guesses about what has been repressed and transformed.

✓ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

- Most significant works were *The Significance of Dreams* (1900) and *On Psychotherapy* (1905)
- Developed numerous theories (or models) of human behavior.
- For Freud, the most powerful motivator of humans is sexuality.

✓ Dynamic Model of Human Psyche

- Human mind is divided into two parts
 1. The Conscious Mind-rational thoughts and controlled intellect
 2. The Unconscious Mind-storehouse of disguised truths, fears, shame, unresolved issues, passions
- As part of this theory, he believed that the conscious mind wanted to control or silence the unconscious mind. Because those thoughts do want to get out, to escape, they come out as parapraxes, or Freudian slips, when we "accidentally" what is really on our minds. Freud famously suggested that "there are no accidents."

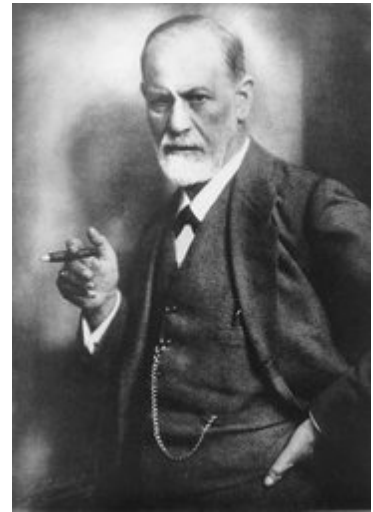
✓ The Economic Model

- The division in the mind can be understood as a war between two opposing forces:
 1. The Pleasure Principle: Desire for Instant Satisfaction
 2. Reality Principle: Societal standards, social mores, law, morals

✓ The Typographical Model



- Id- Irrational, animal, instinctual unconscious
 1. An essential part of the Id is libido, or sex drive.
- Ego- Rational, logical, waking part of the brain. The Ego regulates the Id and tries to balance the parts of the brain.
- Superego- The internal censor that is created by exposure to societal judgment in the form of laws and morals.
 1. The Superego acts as the police of the mind, restricting inappropriate thoughts. When it tries to cast out bad ideas, these are not eliminated, but stored in the subconscious, repressed from our memories.
 2. This function of the superego creates shame and doubt.



✓ **Development of Sexuality**

➤ Oedipus Complex

1. At the age of 3-6, boys are erotically attracted to their mothers. They perceive their fathers as rivals for the attention of their mothers as a result.
2. Boys then suffer a castration complex, fearing that their fathers will eliminate their masculinity because they are rivals.
 - a. This fear leads to repressed sexuality and the desires to one day possess a woman the way their father does.

➤ Electra Complex

1. At the age of 3-6, girls are also attracted to their mothers. Freud argues that they feel as if they have already been castrated, and suffer a feeling of penis envy.
2. The girl then turns her attention to her father, fails to achieve this goal, and begins to identify with her mother.

✓ **Dreams**

➤ Freud argues that dreams are the place where the mind releases repression and shameful events, as well as fear. This unconscious release manifests itself in a series of acceptable symbols.

1. Displacement: In our dreams, we convert an idea into something more acceptable. For example, if one was angry with Mr. Applebee, he/she might dream of a rotting apple.
2. Condensation: Many issues (fears, anger, and shameful events) may manifest themselves as one thing or event.

➤ Failure to resolve conflicts in our dreams leads to neuroses.

➤ Freudian criticism argues that one could interpret a literary work as one would interpret a dream—searching for symbolic meanings that reveal the workings of the author or character's psyche.

✓ **Defense Mechanisms**

➤ Denial occurs when someone fends off awareness of an unpleasant truth or of a reality that is a threat to the ego. For example, a student may have received a bad

grade on a report card but tells himself that grades don't matter. (Some early writers argued for a striking parallel between Freudian denial and Nietzsche's ideas of resentment and the revaluation of values that he attributed to "herd" or "slave" morality.)

➤ Reaction formation takes place when someone takes the opposite approach consciously compared to what he wants unconsciously. For example, someone may engage in violence against another race because, he claims, they are inferior, when unconsciously it is he himself who feels inferior.

➤ Displacement takes place when someone redirects emotion from a "dangerous" object to a "safe" one, such as punching a pillow to avoid hitting a friend.

➤ Repression occurs when an experience is so painful (such as war trauma) that it is subconsciously forced from consciousness, while suppression is a conscious effort to do the same.

➤ Psychological projection occurs when a person "projects" his or her own undesirable thoughts, motivations, desires, feelings—basically parts of oneself—onto someone or something else. An example of this would be to say that Alice doesn't like Bob, but rather than to admit she doesn't like Bob, she will project her sentiment onto Bob, saying that Bob doesn't like her.

➤ Intellectualization involves removing one's self, emotionally, from a stressful event. Intellectualization is often accomplished through rationalization rather than accepting reality, one may explain it away to remove one's self.

➤ Rationalization involves constructing a logical justification for a decision that was originally arrived at through a different mental process. For example, Jim may have bought a tape player to listen to self-help tapes, but he tells his friends he bought it so that he can listen to classic rock mixes for fear of his actual reason being rejected.

➤ Compensation occurs when someone takes up one behavior because one cannot accomplish another behavior. For example, the second born child may clown around to get attention since the older child is already an accomplished scholar.

➤ Sublimation is the channeling of impulses to socially accepted behaviors. For instance, the use of a dark, gloomy poem to describe life by such poets as Emily Dickinson.

✓ **Life and Death Instincts**

➤ Freud believed that humans were driven by two conflicting central desires: libidinal energy (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos). Freud's description of Eros/Libido included all creative, life-producing drives. The Death Drive (or death instinct) represented an urge inherent in all living things to return to a state of calm, or, ultimately, of nonexistence. The presence of the Death Drive was only recognized in his later years, and the contrast between the two represents a revolution in his manner of thinking.

✓ **Carl Jung (1875-1961)**

➤ "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being."

➤ Student of Sigmund Freud for 7 years, before he broke from Freud over his increasing focus on sexuality.

✓ **Jung's Model of the Psyche**

➤ Personal Conscious-each moment of our lives exists as a slideshow, each moment being a new slide

➤ Personal Unconscious- past slides are stored in the personal unconscious

➤ Collective Unconscious- The cumulative knowledge, experiences, and images of the human species. Material in the collective unconscious is like this: inherited. It never came from our current environment. It is the part of the mind that is determined by heredity. So we inherit, as part of our humanity, a collective unconscious; the mind is pre-figured by evolution just as is the body.

➤ Archetypes- Psychological archetypes are thus first prints, or patterns that form the basic blueprint for major dynamic counterparts of the human personality.

For Jung, archetypes pre-exist in the collective unconscious of humanity. They repeat themselves eternally in the psyches of human beings and they determine how we both perceive and behave. Examples of archetypes include:

1. The Innocent
2. The Caregiver
3. The Orphan
4. The Warrior
5. Childbirth
6. The Seasons

➤ Archetypes are critical to literature because they either remind the reader of this collective knowledge, or

➤ Challenge them, forcing the reader to consider a new paradigm

✓ **Example of Psychoanalytical Criticism**

➤ "In the 'Black Cat', the narrator has repressed urges and denied the man he has always wanted to be, because of the social standards of the society in which he lived. The alcohol he ingested allowed him to shirk his inhibitions and find his inner self."

✓ **Strategies for Psychoanalytical Criticism**

➤ Attempt to apply a developmental concept to the work, author, or characters. For example: the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, anal retentiveness, or gender confusion.

➤ Relate the work to psychologically significant events in the author's life.

➤ Consider how repressed material may come out in patterns or imagery.

