FREUDIAN/PSYCHOANALYTICAL QUESTIONS AND ANALYSIS

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**1. Who are the most influential proponents of this type of critical theory?**

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were the most influential proponents of psychoanalytic criticism. Freud is considered to be the “founding father” of psychoanalysis. He lived around the same time as Joseph Conrad, and his applications of the Oedipus complex and analysis of the deepest desires of the subconscious were considered shocking when he was alive. Carl Jung was his student, whom Freud considered to be his protégée. The two eventually fell out due to disagreements on their theories of psychoanalytic criticism. Jung had developed new theories about the collective unconscious and archetypes.

**2. What are some of the major concepts, ideas, characteristics, etc., of this type of theory?  How does one employ/use these concepts?**

The major concepts of this theory are the application of Freud’s dream theory, psychosexual theory, and psychoanalytic theory to the author through analysis of the text, or to a main character within the text. This is known as classic psychoanalytic criticism. Later psychoanalytic theories include the application of Carl Jung’s theories, as well as theories proposed by other psychoanalysts. To employ a psychoanalytic criticism to the text, it is essential to understand both Freud’s and Jung’s theories, as well as the theory of ego-psychology.

Freud’s theory states that all human behavior is affected by the human psyche, which is powered by the libido. The psyche has three levels: the conscious, the preconscious, and the subconscious. Freudian psychoanalysis focuses on withdrawing ideas and desires from the subconscious, which is segregated into three different components: the superego, the ego, and the id. Psychoanalysis strives to withdraw information from a person’s subconscious, whether it is that of the author or a main character of the text.

The superego exists in all three levels of the psyche, and is therefore a more accessible part of the mind. It is conscious of rules, expectations, and the morals of society. This part of the mind urges the person to do what is considered right according to society. This also means that the superego is acquired during early childhood, and develops over time. The id is the deepest part of the subconscious that every person is born with. It is located in deepest part of the subconscious. The id is the foundation of one’s strongest sexual and aggressive behaviours, and is also where one’s desires accumulate. It is an uncontrollable, yet powerful part of the subconscious, and is generally inaccessible. The ego lies in between these two parts of the subconscious, and acts as a compromising factor between the id and the superego by containing components of each. It judges actions and thoughts as to what is considered morally good, while taking into account what is deeply desired. The ego is also a part of the subconscious that develops at around five years of age. Early childhood is when one begins to form fears, needs, and desires, all part of the libido.

Another important event that occurs during childhood is the development of the Oedipus complex. During the phallic stage, which occurs anywhere between the ages of three to six, the superego begins to develop. Males start to envy their fathers, as they crave the attention of their mother. Eventually, the male superego develops through the influence of the father, driven by the hope that one day the male will possess a woman in the same way that the father possesses the mother. In comparison, female superegos do not develop as fully. Females do not aspire to become similar to their mothers. Instead, they lust for their father, which means that the superego is underdeveloped. This provides an explanation for the tensions that are often held between father and son, and mother and daughter.

“Dream analysis” is the final component to Freud’s psychoanalysis theory. It states that dreams are where the human psyche is the most present, particularly the id. The id is more powerful in dreams as compared to when the dreamer is conscious, and presents itself through symbols and imagery. The symbols seen within one’s dream represent what their subconscious most desires. Dream interpretations aid in understanding the most uncontrollable part of the psyche of an individual.

Jung developed Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis with the theory of the “collective unconscious”, and the formation of archetypes. The collective unconscious theory states that all human beings share a collective history. This explains certain behaviours in terms of fears, anxieties, and needs. For example, many humans have a fear of snakes. Jung’s collective unconscious theory can be applied to this, relating the fear to Adam and Eve’s experience with the snake that tempted them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The animal represents desire, temptation, and danger, and humans have passed this knowledge and memory of snakes to younger generations. This adds to the Freudian theory of analyzing symbols and behaviours in the subconscious mind. Jung further developed the analysis of symbols with the formation of archetypes, which provides specific details and behaviours of symbols.

Other psychoanalysts added to Freud’s and Jung’s ideas with the development of ego-psychology. Ego-psychology is the reversal of regular literary analysis. Instead of analyzing the text or the author’s subconscious, the reader’s subconscious is scrutinized. This is done through the dissection of the reader’s response and analysis of the novel. It reveals the reader’s repressed desires and subconscious tendencies.

To employ these concepts, one must look for clues within the novel, similar to the way Freud would have done with his patients and their behaviour. The text itself can be considered the ‘dream’ of the author. Any symbolism within the text could then be interpreted as a component of the author’s subconscious in the same way that a dream would be. For example, a pointy object may represent the male genitalia, and a hollow object the female genitalia. This would be an example of a suppressed sexual desire or a revelation of subconscious infantile wishes.

**3. What kinds of questions would a Freudian reading of a text produce/pose/employ, or kinds of explorations does a Freudian reading encourage?**

    Several questions should be kept into consideration when psychoanalyzing a text. They refer to repression, the Oedipus complex, and the classical and modern forms of psychoanalysis.

1. How does repression provide a structure, or framework for the text?
2. Are there family dynamics that are influencing the work? Can the Oedipus complex apply to the text in terms of tensions between relations?
3. What does the work suggest psychologically about the author in terms of the ego, superego, and the id? Focus on the author in terms of sexuality, love, sexual behaviour, captivation, and fear of death.
4. What does the way the reader analyzes the text suggest about the reader? Does it suggest that the reader has repressed feelings or tensions?

**4. What are the strengths of this type of reading practice?**

Freudian criticism of a novel provides a deeper, more thorough understanding of the author and the reader. It allows readers to scrutinize characters and events of the novel in multiple ways. Readers must comprehend the importance and effect that they have on the novel, but also question what they suggest about the author. Instead of merely focusing on what is said in the novel, Freudian criticism provides insight as to what is not said by the author through events and characters. For example, in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad does not directly refer to himself, but integrates his character and symbols of his interpretation of the subconscious into characters such as Marlow, and events such as the venture deep into the jungle. Psychoanalysis provides insight to the subconscious of the reader by analyzing the emotions and reactions that the reader has towards the text. The reader’s analysis of a novel can showcase their subconscious mind and what it desires.

**5. Does the group see or feel that there are some weaknesses in this type of reading?**

Freudian theory constantly seeks to analyze what is not being said as opposed to what is being said by the author. However, it is important to understand both to have a thorough comprehension of the text, as well as a more rounded reading experience. Psychoanalysis is very subjective, and usually personal. It is complicated to prove that the reader’s interpretation of the author’s subconscious is accurate. Some argue that Freudian psychoanalysis is limited, and biased. He only chose to examine patients of a specific mindset and background, so it is possible that his theory of psychoanalysis can only apply to a specific group of people. Another issue that can occur when psychoanalyzing the text is the loss of enjoyment of the text. If the reader focuses solely on discovering the behaviour of the author or character’s subconscious, they often miss other messages contained within the novel. A strong reader will understand and remember the importance of analyzing what is and isn’t being said in a novel.

**Freudian Analysis of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness***

The text is to the author as the dream is to the dreamer. The author’s subconscious desires, or the id, are held within the text. Just as the human psyche is present within the dream, the entire psyche of the author is present within the text. The subconscious mind in the text follows the same pattern as the subconscious in a dream; it is used to psychoanalyse the author.

In *Heart of Darkness,* there are parallels that can be made between Joseph Conrad and Marlow. Both Conrad and Marlow journeyed through the Congo and shared similar experiences. Conrad’s subconscious is projected into Marlow’s experiences and thoughts, and the way Marlow tells his story to his crew. Marlow’s tale of his journey through the Congo and his descriptions of the events that took place there are vague and often unclear. He is frustrated with his storytelling and says to his fellow sailors, “It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream - making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . .” (p.17). This quotation showcases how Marlow had suppressed his true desires, feelings, and thoughts as to what he had witnessed on his journey. He cannot include them in his story as he has buried them within his subconscious. Conrad is blocking Marlow’s feelings, and by extension, his own feelings. He is withholding the truth from the reader just as Marlow did with his crew. This is an example of Marlow and Conrad’s struggle between their ids and superegos.

Conrad’s voyage into the Congo affected him psychologically and physically. The things he witnessed traumatized him, and he lived out his retirement from sailing in poor health. He had volatile mood swings and lived in poverty with his family. Conrad felt helpless, as there was nothing he could do about the horrors of imperialism. This is reflected in *Heart of Darkness* repeatedly, with the futility of the characters’ actions. The doctor exemplifies the psychological change that Conrad experienced in the Congo; he measures the width of Marlow’s skull while telling him that the changes he will experience on his travels will occur in his mind. His practices and warnings are pointless as he never sees his patients again, whether it is because they never return from Africa, or because they do not seek his services again.

During Marlow’s voyage into the jungle, he encounters another ship that appears to be shelling at nothing but bushes. He laughs at the sight, saying, “There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives – he called them enemies! – hidden out of sight somewhere.” (p. 22). This quote illuminates two important thoughts in Marlow’s mind: the first is that he finds humour in the ship’s useless shooting, and the second is that he scoffs at the thought of the native camp being called their enemy. This is also a reflection of Conrad’s mentality, his disillusionment with colonization tints the way Marlow views the world.

Another example of Conrad’s disillusionment is when Marlow discovers the grove where the Congo natives are sent to rest, or to die. He is appalled and horror-struck at the sight of these starving men, while the other Europeans pay no attention to them. Marlow reaches into his pocket and offers one of the young men a biscuit. This small, yet significant act of kindness is perhaps the most futile. One Swedish biscuit is not going to save this man’s life, and doing a good deed for one native will not help the rest of them, or wipe away Marlow’s pity, guilt, or horror. It is also an embodiment of Conrad’s own personal view that the heroic deeds and morals of honourable men can not measure up to the forces of evil, or darkness.

Conrad’s awareness of the levels of the subconscious can be seen through the metaphor of the three stations that Marlow visits. His search for Kurtz takes Marlow through three stations: the Outer, Central, and Inner stations. These stations can be compared with the three stages of the subconscious mind: the superego, the ego, and the id. As Marlow ventures further into the jungle, the manifestations of these three components of the mind grow darker and more mysterious.

The Outer Station emanates a sense of chaos, with the chained locals starving to death and causing explosions. The station is run by a kempt manager who attempts to control the locals according to European societal customs. The Outer Station is related to the superego, which regulates one’s actions by guiding morals according to society’s expectations, even if it does not always succeed. The manager of the Outer Station has no success with governing the locals according to his rules.

The Inner Station portrays the id. Here, Kurtz is free from the societal customs that can restrict his behaviour and shape his morals. He has obtained what his subconscious desires by gaining control of the natives in the area, and essentially building his own empire. There is no force of the superego to judge what society would consider “correct”, because there is no form of controlled society around. His id has become a reality.

In the subconscious mind, the ego lies between the extreme behaviour levels of the superego and the id. The Central Station represents the ego, which compromises the behaviour of the superego and the id. It allows some indulgence of what one wants, while striving to do what is good. This is seen in the in the manager of the Central Station, who resents Kurtz for his former glory in the ivory business, but still manages to have a strong control of the people working at the station. It is the medium between the two other stations, a collaboration of components from the superego and the id.

The stations highlight Conrad’s belief that the mind can be segregated into three separate components, each with a distinct behaviour. Venturing into the barbaric jungle suggests that the further one goes into the subconscious, the darker and less controlled it is. It relates to what the doctor said near the beginning of the novel, how one can change so much as he ventures closer to the “heart of darkness”. The gradual decrease in order at the stations as Marlow travels deeper into the Congo suggest Conrad’s interpretation of the levels in the subconscious. It directly reflects how he perceives his own subconscious, if he is able to access and understand it.

The relationship between Marlow and Kurtz can be understood by relating their personalities to the behaviours of the id and the superego. Consider that Marlow is the superego, and Kurtz is the id. Marlow describes Kurtz as someone with a, “soul that knew no constraints, no faith, and no fear (p.125).” This quotation serves to illustrate Kurtz’s role as the id, as he does not consider reality and simply acts based on his desires. In contrast, Marlow strives to follow society’s expectations, just as the superego does. For example, when Marlow and his crew are leaving with Kurtz, Marlow pulls the whistle to scare the natives away instead of letting the pilgrims shoot at them. Marlow becomes more and more familiar with Kurtz during their time together, and becomes more familiar with his id. At the beginning of Marlow’s journey, he is hardly intrigued with Kurtz. He says, “[he] would give some thoughts to Kurtz. [He] wasn’t very interested in him” (p.54). As the novel progresses he becomes increasingly interested in Kurtz, and upon believing that Kurtz may be dead Marlow, “became aware that that was exactly what [he] had been looking forward to - a talk with Kurtz” (p.86). There is not much differentiation between the id and the superego in a dream, and the same can be said about Marlow and Kurtz during their voyage. As Marlow becomes more connected with Kurtz, the id and the superego move closer together.

Together, Kurtz and Marlow, or the id and superego, make up the human psyche. Anything that is desired by the psyche is expressed by Kurtz and controlled by Marlow. Conrad holds the same desires as Kurtz. Kurtz is addicted to the power he gains from ivory, and wants to be revered by the natives. This is illustrated when Kurtz is willing to shoot “the Russian” because he possesses the ivory that Kurtz wants.  These two characters highlight the different ways that the id and superego deal with desires.

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