

## Freudian Psychology: Some Possible Uses (Tsushima/Freud)

I wish to first write a little about the utility of a psychological reading on the AP test. If this does not interest you, skip directly to the second part where I model the sort of writing you could potentially be generating in the Tsushima assignment.

Earlier I wrote (Part I of the supplemental help for the conflict map) about the New Critics and their stripping away of all external sources of appeal in analyzing reading, their single-minded focus on the text *qua* text. Clearly a Freudian reading of a text is exactly the sort of reading that the New Critics would condemn, since it depends for its authority on concepts outside the text (Freud's metaphoric division of the personality into Id, Ego, and Super-Ego, etc.), rather than a close reading of the text itself. A Freudian reading, in other words, treats the text as secondary, a record of psychic processes that are only understood by understanding the writings of an Austrian physician at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The obvious question that should occur to you is why would I choose to undermine the type of reading that I have already claimed is the *de facto* bias of the test itself?

The answer is, yes, it is possible to use these concepts on the test, even if it is not quite compatible with the sorts of reading you will be doing for the majority of the test. As long as you are still focused on close reading, you should be fine in a couple of very obvious contexts.

The first context of using this information would be if you were looking at a passage that seems to be using Freudian ideas in a fairly obvious way, a selection that seems to treat the mind or mental processes in Freudian terms. What you don't want to do is read a text this way that does not assume these things, though at one time this approach was quite fashionable. See, for instance, Ernest Jones' 1949 *Hamlet and Oedipus*, where he attempts to psychoanalyze Shakespeare's Hamlet-- a reading that was once seen as groundbreaking and is now more likely to be seen as quaint and wrongheaded. People still do psychological readings of texts, but it is likely to be much more sophisticated than anything you could produce and much less likely to use Freud as the starting point (and more likely to be utilizing the ideas of French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, a much more theoretical approach that is well beyond the scope of this course). For our purposes though, unless it's about the mind (especially the working of the mind under stress), it's almost always best to use another critical approach. Nonetheless, it's surprising how much Freud crops up in 20<sup>th</sup> century writing; like Greek mythology and the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, he has become part of the cultural heritage of Western civilization.

Second, and more obviously for you, if you're writing on the free response section about Murakami, you should be prepared to write about Freud. Many of you read Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart* over the summer, and many of you will choose to read his *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in the spring. In both novels, Murakami literalizes the metaphor of conscious worlds of rationality/responsibility versus unconscious worlds of desire/repression into a physical split into parallel worlds. It's a feature of almost all of his work, and the working out of the conflict between these two worlds mirrors the struggle within each of us to find the correct balance between the competing forces within us-- an idea particularly relevant to a Japanese society

that values conformity over individuality, where even everyday communication depends in large part on not revealing how you truly feel.

So how does all of this work in practice?

For my text I will use a short poem from American poet Robert Lowell's 1973 *The Dolphin*. I chose Lowell because he often wrote about his own mental illness, manic depression (bipolar disorder), and in common with many of his generation, he tends to think of these things in Freudian terms. Lowell was most famously associated with the confessional poetry movement, a group of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American poets who very self-consciously used material from their own lives in their poems, as is very much the case here. There are other, better Lowell poems I could have used for this purpose, but this one has the great virtues of both being very short and very dense (giving me lots to write about).

"Symptoms"

I fear my conscience because it makes me lie.  
A dog seems to lap water from the pipes,  
life-enhancing water brims my bath--  
(the bag of waters or the lake of the grave...?)  
from the palms of my feet to my wet neck--  
I have no mother to lift me in her arms.  
I feel the old infection, it comes once yearly:  
lowered good humor, then an ominous  
rise of irritable enthusiasm...  
Three dolphins bear our little toilet stand,  
the grin of the eyes rebukes the scowl of the lips,  
they are crazy with the thirst. I soak,  
examining and then examining  
what I really have against myself.

The plot of the poem is fairly straightforward. The speaker (an obvious alter-ego for Lowell himself) is bathing and reflecting on his illness-- an impending manic episode that will be followed by a lapse into depression. Mirroring his fears, objects of exterior perception take on ominous meaning for the speaker: the water and a toilet stand with three dolphins forming its base. First, the flowing water from the tap is compared to the fits and starts of a dog's lapping. This could be read against the "lake of the grave" in line 6, a possible reference to the River Styx in Greek mythology-- the body of water one must cross before entering the Underworld. If so, the actual entrance to the land of the dead (Hades) was guarded by the three-headed dog Cerberus, the number three echoed in the dolphins in line 10 (lending more plausibility to this interpretation). Lowell often uses such classical allusions. Second, the water is linked to both birth, "the bag of waters" (the bag of amniotic fluid), and death, "the lake of the grave" (4) (again, a possible allusion to the River Styx). Finally, the dolphins forming the base of the toilet stand have a friendly aspect ("the grin of their eyes" [11]) that is belied by their fierce scowl and

unquenchable thirst (11-12). The most straightforward way of reading the poem would be to focus almost entirely on these images and what they connote, though image analysis is still a few weeks away in this course.

Lowell is unlikely to be ironizing his own illness, given what a hardship his periodic breakdowns were for himself, his family, and friends, but notice the use of paradox (a concept related to irony). The poem is organized by the repeated juxtaposition of opposites (starting with the first line). His conscience makes him lie (1); water is associated with birth and death (3); and the dolphins in the toilet stand are both non-threatening and threatening (11). Again, the poem could read by simply paying attention to contradictions and trying to reconcile them. I might want to return to some of these ideas, but, for now, I've read enough to know that I should be reading the poem straight, not ironically.

Having established the literal meaning of the poem and ruling out an ironic reading (steps you should never skip when encountering a cold text), I'm ready to begin the task.

There are at least two obvious places I could connect the poem to Freud: the intrusion of unconscious processes into conscious processes, and the role of the Super-Ego as conscience. I'm only going to model one of these (remember, you are responsible for two paragraphs-- or at least the equivalent of two paragraphs), and I've chosen the second option as the one to model, since it will allow me to be a bit more technical.

The first option would read more like a conventional close reading of the images and paradoxes, connecting with Freud only with the idea that abnormal mental states represent a leakage of unconscious fears and desires into the world of externally perceived reality (essentially the paragraph I quote from the Freud lecture at the top of the Tsushima assignment). If I were I completing the model, this would be my second paragraph, and I would make a big deal out of the classical allusions, since the Greek underworld works neatly as a stand-in for the Freudian Id.

Here is what I came up with:

**For the speaker in Lowell's "Symptoms," conscience represents not the force of moral restraint, but, paradoxically, the harbinger of a loss of restraint in the manic episodes of the speaker's bipolar disorder. According to Freud, individuals resist having their unconscious laid bare to their conscious mind; this is, after all, why the psychic mechanism of repression exists, viz. to suppress that which is painful-- why patients of psychoanalysis typically attempt to evade the goal of the therapeutic process (85-86). For the speaker in the poem, however, the "rise of irritable enthusiasm" (9)-- that is, the arising of the manic phase in a bipolar episode-- is the stripping bare of the Super-Ego's moral function, leaving the Ego in a "blissful state of intoxication" (Freud 76), as the Ego is free to act without the "punitive function" of the socially conditioned Super-Ego's parental function (Freud 76-77). Thus, while the poem's speaker literally has "no mother to**

lift [him] in her arms” (6) (in context, no mother as nurturer to comfort him in his distress), he is soon to lose the other purpose of parental authority as well: “the power, function and even the methods of the parental agency” to rein in repressed desires (Freud 78). What the speaker fears, in other words, is the loss of restraint, externalized in the sinister imagery of the poem: first in the lapping of the dog that suggests a contamination of the bath waters (1); second in the water that is explicitly connected to the source of the psychic trauma of both birth (the “bag of water” of the amniotic sac) and death (“the lake of the grave”) (4); and third in the kitschy bathroom dolphins that are transformed into sinister creatures that “scowl” at the speaker (a stand-in for veneer of civilization that masks a more troubling reality) (4). The latter image of the dolphins, in particular, are clearly connected to the speaker himself (at least in his mind)-- his mania like the dolphins’ scowl, “crazy with the thirst” (12), transforming what should be a benignant image into one of unchecked passion and greed. This, in turn, helps to explain the speaker’s motive in “examining / what I really have against myself” (13-14), namely the loss of control, the loss of the Super-Ego function to reveal an Ego that the speaker would prefer not to confront. Hence the paradox in the first line: the Super-Ego-- that which restrains the Ego-- is, for the speaker, a lie, since he is all too aware that it is not his authentic self, merely the “grin of the eyes” of the dolphins (11) that hide a darker reality (the scowl). It is this “thirst” (12) that the speaker fears, his actual self as revealed by the abandonment of conscience in a manic episode coupled with the realization that this unattractive egotistical aspect of his psychical personality may, in fact, be the core of his real identity-- that is, his true self. As such, the speaker’s conscience evokes fear because its function is a merely temporary roadblock for an unrestrained Ego that always lurks in the periphery of the speaker’s vision.

A few observations:

- The analysis is technical, and the more technical you can become, the better your grade will probably be. Do not let jargon take the place of analysis, however. When you use specialized terms for the first time, define them briefly (or at least make it obvious what they mean through context).
- On the one hand, it might seem like it is as much about Freud as it is about the poem, but Freud is always used to come to better understanding of the poem.
- References to the lecture are specific and in much more detail than my overview in class about these concepts. Also, do not “quote” from my presentation in class. That is a summary of ideas from the Freud readings, and it is a summary from a complete non-expert (me).
- Sometimes I use the exact words of Freud (especially when I think he absolutely nailed a description), but I’m just as likely to simply use paraphrase with a parenthetical reference.
- If I do quote from Freud, I do not try to do the close reading analysis one would expect with a literary quote; the information is important, not the way that Freud phrased

something. This is in contrast to a literary text, where often the exact wording is key to uncovering hidden meaning.

- I made no claims in my writing that this represents a valid psychological diagnosis; instead I continually represent these ideas as belonging to Freud. The importance of this last point cannot be emphasized enough, since you are not really a psychologist (and therefore lack the training and education to credibly represent these ideas as fact). More importantly, since psychology has developed quite a bit since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, you risk inaccuracy if you pretend that Freud always had everything exactly right.
- That said, if you remember to represent these ideas as belonging to Freud, it removes the obligation to establish that Freud was right. All you are doing is a Freudian analysis of a literary text.
- I use my analysis to demonstrate both my understanding of the text and my understanding of Freud (this is an assignment after all).

The big idea, though, is how taking internal conflict seriously allows you to generate lots of commentary and analysis that both uncover themes as well as demonstrate your mastery of a text. Even if you do not use a Freudian approach in the future, treating these sorts of internal conflicts as the big story in a reading is a truly powerful approach-- and one you should always at least consider utilizing when asked to explicate a particular text.