

Freudian Psychology

Part Four: How to Write about Freudian Ideas (Developing the Argument)

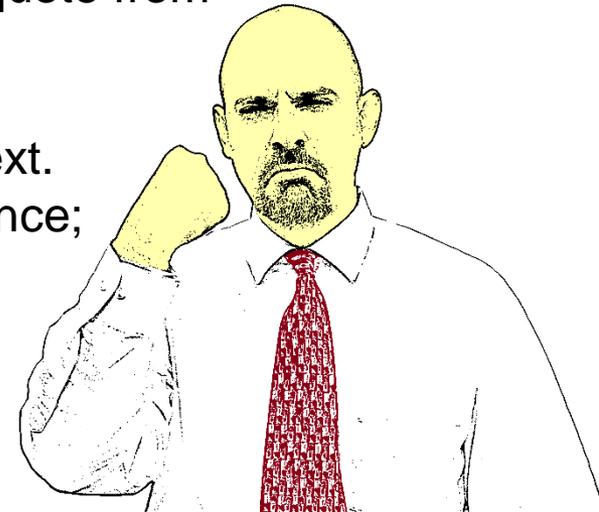
Do Not Do These Things (Rookie Mistakes)

Do not treat the texts as equal. The focus should always be squarely on the literary text, not on Freud. Here's a sample paragraph structure that does this: establish the comparison; introduce your evidence from the literary text; introduce the correspondence with a Freudian idea; and use that Freudian idea to explicate the example from the literary text.

Do not overdo your explanations of Freud's ideas. When you teach them to your reader, it should be in as few words as possible. Otherwise you give the impression that your real focus is on psychology and not on explaining how the literary text works.

Do not let the reader become confused about which text you're quoting from. Of course, this problem is completely eliminated if you only quote from the literary text and paraphrase from Freud.

Do not forget to apply the theoretical idea to the literary text. Many student paragraphs set up an idea; introduce evidence; say it is just like Freud; explain Freud; and never do anything else. The final step is to connect the Freudian idea to the literary example. This is the point of your analysis: to help the reader understand how the literary text works.



Things You Don't Have to Do

You don't have to prove Freud's theories are true. The Freudian stuff is just a way to analyze the text; it is not your argument. By way of analogy, you don't have to convince your reader that (in general) words and phrases actually possess connotations (in addition to a literal meaning) whenever you do a diction analysis. You simply assume that they do and spend your time explaining why the connotations of specific words and phrases are important. Same thing here.

You don't have to use quotations from either the Freud lecture or the article about repression. What is important are Freud's ideas-- not the specific way that he phrased those ideas. Therefore, paraphrase generally works better than quotation, and if you do use quotes, they should be snippet quotes. Remember, though, even specific paraphrase requires parenthetical citation.

You don't have to do everything. It's fine to only focus on the Id or repression or the the Super-ego, etc.. You might refer to other parts of the theory, but you're under no obligation to cover it all. In fact, you shouldn't be trying to do this. Even properly setting up and explaining one or two of these Freudian concepts ends up being a big deal.

Things You Have to Do

You have to let the reader know that you are doing a Freudian analysis. If you're writing a full essay, make sure it's in your thesis.

You should introduce who Freud is the first time you mention him. This could be as simple as writing something like, "according to *father of modern psychology* Sigmund Freud," or, "*psychological theorist* Sigmund Freud argues."

You have to teach the theory before you do the analysis. Given the scope of assignments in this class, this should be no more than a sentence or two. Sometimes it might even be less if the basic concept is easily grasped (e.g., "X is similar to the Freudian Id-- *a repository of instinctual drives and repressed ideas*"). The goal is not to give an exhaustive account of Freud's ideas, but to bring the reader up to speed on the basics so s/he can follow your argument.

At its root, you're comparing two ideas: a literary example and something that Freud theorized. Your analysis has to explain how the two ideas match up.

You've got to know what you're talking about. There are really five essential concepts here: Id, Ego, Super-ego, repression, and the division between the conscious and unconscious mind. Displacement and sublimation are also nice to understand. That's really not a lot to master.

Strategies for Finding the Evidence You Need

Look for correspondences. For example, the Id is chaotic, instinctual (especially aggressive/sexual instincts), and illogical (it wants everything, and it wants it now). Ask yourself, is there anything in the text like that? Treat it like you were looking for evidence to explain an extended metaphor (a metaphor in which two ideas are alike in multiple ways).

Focus on internal conflicts, societal conflicts (which often can be framed in terms of the Super-ego), responses to traumatic events, and dreams.

In terms of characterization: pride, guilt, and anxiety can all be analyzed in Freudian terms. Similarly, secondary characters that urge either evil or restraint can be analyzed in Freudian terms.

In terms of character arcs: coming to terms with trauma, maturation, and personality modification (including personality formation in young people) can all be analyzed in Freudian terms.

In terms of text details: underground spaces, dream worlds (where the normal rules don't apply), magic, contrasts between wild and civilized spaces, and temptations are the sorts of things that might respond to Freudian analysis (probably as symbols).