Freudian Psychology

Part Three: How to Write about Freudian Ideas (Structure)

Freudian Analysis is Just a Method, not Your Argument

This cannot be emphasized enough. The argument is not (for example) *The Id is the instinctual portion of the psyche*; rather, the argument is *Concept X can best be understood in terms of Freud's concept of the Id*. In practice, Concept X is most likely to be a conflict, a personality trait, or a symbol (including characters who can be read symbolically). Your focus, in others words, must still be literary, and it needs to be framed in terms of literary analysis.

Because the Freudian ideas are an analytical tool, then, the actual explanations of how those ideas work will occur mostly in the second half of body paragraphs. Given this, most topic sentences for body paragraphs will have two parts: 1) Here's this important thing that is going on in the text; and 2) One of the Freudian concepts helps to explain how this works. That means in the body paragraphs you are responsible for identifying why the text feature is important, introducing the Freudian idea, and breaking apart the text features using the Freudian idea so that the reader better understands why the text feature is important.

A word of caution: just matching up text features to Freudian ideas is not good enough. That's just a list. Instead, this process of matching the two sets of ideas has to occur in terms of a larger argument.

Use Freudian Analysis to Uncover the Bigger Ideas in a Text

What does this mean?

First and most obviously this can mean connecting to a theme. Every literary text is trying to communicate a particular point of view about the world. It can be descriptive (*This is the way the world works*), or it can be prescriptive (*This is the way the world should or should not work*). How this works in literature is analogous to how non-fiction texts can usually be categorized as either expository or persuasive. If you don't understand these terms, stop now and look them up (because they are critical).
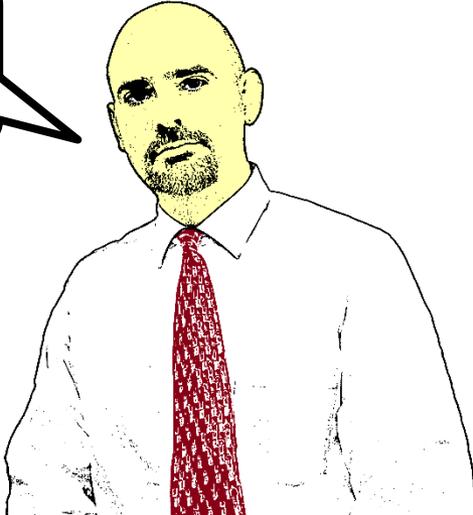
Think of theme as the argument that the text is making.

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What does this mean?

Second, you can write about character. This needs to be some big picture observation about what the character is like or how that character changes over the course of a text.

This big picture idea can also be an internal conflict if your focus is less on the tension itself and more on how it is resolved. For example, a character might be tempted to behave badly (an internal conflict), and the conclusion might be something about how the character's choice defines that character's personality.

In Freudian terms, analysis of character should usually be framed in terms of conflict, since the Ego must arbitrate between the competing demands of the Id and Super-ego. A conclusion, then, could be in terms of how the Ego resolved this tension (or failed to resolve it) and how this helps the reader to understand the nature of that character.

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Third, you can define the scope of a conflict, with conclusions that establish why this conflict is important to the reader's understanding of the text. This can obviously overlap with characterization-type conclusions, but the conflict oriented ones generally focus less on resolutions and more on what is significant about why the character is experiencing the conflict in the first place. As such, unresolved conflicts or conflicts that are not resolved well lend themselves to this type of conclusion.

In Freudian terms, extended analyses of repression or imperfect repression often work well here, since your big picture idea is probably going to have something to do with why the character is trying to repress an idea in the first place.

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Fourth, you can focus on writer's craft. This only works if you're focusing on a literary strategy that is part of a larger pattern in the text. Examples, of this include looking at the ways patterns of imagery develop, an extended metaphor that governs the logic of a text, the establishment of tone or mood through patterns of diction and imagery usage, or the way that irony is developed in a text. This strategy works best with a shorter text (especially a poem) or excerpt.

I suspect this approach won't be terribly helpful for a Freudian analysis, as it requires a level of technical (literary) analysis on top of another technical (psychological) analysis that is almost certainly going to be a bridge too far for most students. In other words, just connecting the ideas to Freud will be complicated enough for most without adding another layer of theoretical complexity on top of that.

There are obviously other big picture ideas, but keeping these four in mind should give you plenty of options for virtually every task you will be asked to accomplish in this class or on the AP exam. Whatever you choose, though, the take-away idea is that thinking about the big picture cannot be an afterthought; rather, it should be the animating idea behind your argument.

Divide Your Argument into Two Parts

There is nothing magical about a two-part structure, but it will be the scope of the majority of the assignments in this class. This is because a four-paragraph structure (intro, two body paragraphs, and conclusion) is the most practicable structure for the essays on the AP test (given the time limitations under which you will be working). As a result, my minimum expectations for most tasks will be two paragraphs (in which the information that would normally appear in an intro and conclusion are either implied or they are folded into the argument in abbreviated form).

The big advantage of thinking about a writing task as consisting of two parts is that it's easy to do, especially if you have a limited numbers of structures at the ready that will work in virtually every situation.

Depending on your argument and the way that you paragraph ideas, a two part division may be too limiting. You do not need my permission to break this rule.
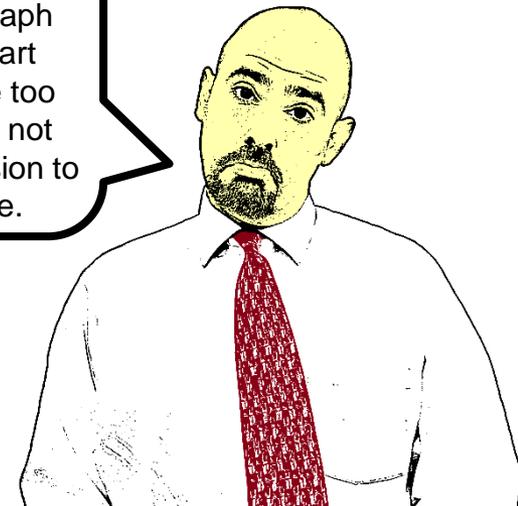
Four Common Structures You Should Know

I will emphasize four of these structures throughout this class: Before/After, Cause/Effect, Contrast, and Idea/Qualification. What all of these have in common is the way that they develop a single idea over two paragraphs, where one paragraph sets up the next (leading to a cohesive whole). There are obviously other potential structures, but at least one of these four will work for the overwhelming majority of writing tasks. Learning these four structures, then, frees up valuable time in a timed writing setting (or at home-- when you just want to get your homework done).

A fifth structure (Reason One/Reason Two) is not advised, as it is almost always becomes two superficial mini-essays that should have each been expanded into their own separate arguments. The test for this kind of superficiality is whether the body paragraphs can be switched around and the essay still makes sense. This is true the vast majority of the time for Reason One/Reason Two essays, suggesting that the writer is not really developing a single idea with any kind of depth.

A sixth structure (Author Uses Literary Element X/ Author Uses Literary Element Y) is not only ill-advised, it is also incompetent. Don't even think of doing this unless your goal is to fail the AP test and make Cs, Ds, and Fs in this class.

Structure One: Before/After

I. Intro and thesis
II. Up until X moment, Y is true (Y=an interpretation, not an event)
III. After X moment, Z is true (Z=an interpretation, not an event)
IV. Conclusion: change shows something important in the text (from thesis)

What you're looking for here is a turning point. This isn't a literary term per se, but most narratives have moments that fundamentally change the nature of a text.

In terms of Freudian analysis, you'll often be focusing on internal conflicts within the protagonist, so changes in the way that character interacts with the world are often markers of a change in the character's psychic state.

Structure One: Example

I am using the "Jabberwocky" poem and connecting to a conflict in the text for my big picture idea.

I. Thesis (my argument): The battle with the Jabberwock functions as metaphor for the Ego mediating between the Id and Super-ego; this process is essential to the formation of personal identity.
II. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph one: Before his son dispatches the Jabberwock, the father's fear of the unknown defines his interaction with his son.

> Potential evidence: 1) father is a moral authority, and his diction ("beware" x2, "shun") is framed in terms of command and prohibition-- all similar to the Super-ego; 2) the object of father's prohibitions is an unreasoning force of nature, defined by violence and instinct ("jaws that bite," "claws that catch," "eyes of flame"), and located in a space defined by chaos ("tulgey wood")-- all evocative of the Id; 3) protagonist "[rests]" and "[stands]" in "uffish thought"-- a paralysis indicative of an unresolved mediation between demands of these two forces.

III. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph two: In dispatching the Jabberwock, the son symbolically embraces society's values; the father's approval signifies the pride of the Ideal Self.

> Potential evidence: 1) indecision gives way to decision ("One, two! One, two! And through and through / The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!")-- similar to the way the Ego must decide between Id and Super-ego; 2) son has rejected violence, instinct, and chaos in slaying the Jabberwock ("He left it dead, and with its head / He went galumphing back."); 3) the father's pride ("beamish boy," "O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!" "in his joy") is mirrored in the son's sense of accomplishment ("with its head / He went galumphing back")-- similar to the pride experienced when the psyche chooses moral goals.

IV. Conclusion (the big picture): Defining the characters in Freudian terms (father=Super-ego, son=Ego, Jabberwock=Id) illustrates an internal psychic process. In mediating between the Id and Super-ego, the Ego navigates the external world, defining itself in terms of its choices. In this way, personality forms by the gaps between our actions and who we conceive ourselves to be (the Ideal Self).

Structure Two: Cause/Effect

I. Intro and thesis
II. X is true
III. X causes Y
IV. Conclusion: Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)

This is pretty straightforward; you're looking for critical preconditions that act as a catalyst for something else that drives the story. This can be an event (in which case it usually turns into a specialized case of Before/After), a decision a character makes, a personality trait, or even a feature of the setting (such as an oppressive social norm). Really, it could be anything.

The trick to using this structure is to work backwards. Identify the interesting or important thing you want to examine in your writing and ask yourself, "How did it arise." Boom! You now have an essay plan.

For a Freudian analysis, this could be a traumatic experience that engenders some kind of psychic response (e.g., repression), a decision that results in a psychic response (e.g., guilt or pride), or a psychic demand (e.g., instinct or conscience) that is either accepted or rejected.

Structure Two: Example

I am Chapter 1 and connecting to character for my big picture idea.

I. Thesis (my argument): Alice's interaction with the Looking-glass is a symbolic assimilation of the Super-ego.

II. Simplified topic sentence for body paragraph one: Alice longs for power and moral authority.

   Potential evidence: 1) Alice adopts the role of parental authority in her play: true in terms of authority (telling Dinah: "Oh, you wicked little thing!" "Now don't interrupt me!") and didactic function ("Do you know what to-morrow is, Kitty?"); 2) in real life, Alice is the object of these admonitions and lessons, not the originator ("there'll be no one here to scold me away from the fire"); in imagination, she adopts the role of censure and guide-- evocative of Super-ego and conscience-- suggesting both admiration and desire

III. Simplified topic sentence for body paragraph two: This desire results in Alice crossing through the Looking-glass, a Freudian dream world where she can indulge her fantasies.

   Potential evidence: 1) normal rules are inverted and reversed ("what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible"), suggesting the unconscious world of possibility and desire; 2) Alice takes on actual power and authority (manipulation of the White King and Queen, the size differential between herself and the tiny adult surrogates; cleaning the White King as if he were a child); 3) Sublimated instinctual drives are re-directed and constrained by the Super-ego (with Alice choosing productive roles in her new environment, a sort of literalized imagination)

IV. Conclusion (the big picture): The Looking-glass world depicts maturation as a process whereby children internalize and adopt societal values. Children are subject to authority; emulate its norms; and (ultimately) take their place in society as authorities themselves. In moving between a literal childhood and symbolic adulthood, Alice can model her integration as a fully functioning member of the community. It is a symbolic growing up.

Structure Three: Contrast

I. Intro and thesis
II. Concept X
III. Contrasts with Concept Y
IV. Conclusion: Difference/Preference for X or Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)

Contrast essays are almost always more interesting to read than Compare essays. The reason for this is pretty straightforward: most Compare essays are really Reason One/Reason Two essays in disguise, where you're taking two independent routes to proving the same thing. As a result, Compare essays read like two superficial mini-essays, each lasting a single body paragraph.

That is not to say there aren't good Compare essays, but I would be extremely wary of the structure, especially when you have better alternatives.

Contrast essays are certainly one of them. Differences imply conflict, so writing about them is much more likely to get at something fundamental about how the text works. If, for example, you are defining something as important to the text, looking at its opposite can't help but generate insights about what makes the idea important in the first place.

Structure Three: Example

I am using the material surrounding the "Jabberwocky" poem and the excerpt from Chapter 6 and connecting to theme for my big picture idea.

I. Thesis (my argument): In explication of the "Jabberwocky poem," Carroll contrasts conscious rationality with unconscious irrationality to reveal something of the nature of the world.

II. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph one: Alice is defined by her rationality and desire to explicate the world.

   Potential evidence: 1) Alice wants to make sense of the poem; she "[puzzles]" over it; it is still "pretty" but "rather hard to understand" with "ideas," though "I don't exactly know what they are!" 2) similar to rational Ego that tries to make navigate the external world, mediating between reality and desire (the Reality Principle)

III. Simplified topic sentence for body paragraph two: Carroll contrasts this with the Looking-glass world's irrational logic that defies explication.

   Potential evidence: 1) the meaning of words is indeterminate; Humpty-Dumpty is a "master" of them and "seem[s] very clever at explaining;" though he "understands" the nonsense words, however, the rules are arbitrary and rely on a hermeneutic circle of nonsense to which Alice is not privy; 2) similar to the irrational unconscious, defined by irrationality and contradiction; meaning is defined not by reality, but by desire (e.g., the Pleasure Principle); it is marked by contradiction and arbitrary certainty

IV. Conclusion (the big picture): On one level, meaning is arbitrary and indeterminate, and attempts to construct it rely on a logic that defies rational consistency. Like the Ego trying to navigate between reality and desire, attempts to make sense of external experience and internal perception is imperfect, as the rules governing each are incommensurate. Navigating the world, then, is marked more by compromise, than epistemological certainty, as the nature of the world is defined by a fundamental ambiguity that is rooted in subjective perception.

Structure Four: Idea/Qualification

I. Intro and thesis
II. Idea/Expectation/Appearance
III. Idea/Expectation/Appearance is qualified/contradicted/reversed by another Idea/Reality
IV. Conclusion: The gap between the two shows something important in the text (from thesis)

These are specialized contrast essays where the ideas being contrasted are contradictory on some level. However, in these essays, both ideas are still true on some level, as the tension remains unresolved.

The most common forms this essay takes are the paradox essay (where the two ideas seem to cancell each other out, yet are nonetheless both true), the irony essay (where expectation and reality both exist on some level, creating the potential for the doubled meaning), and the complexity essay (where the two ideas reveal inconsistency, but it don't rise to the level of paradox).

The last form is the most useful if characterization is going to be your primary analytical tool. Character essays where one paragraph is about one trait or desire and another paragraph is about an inconsistent trait or desire are very easy to write, and the conclusions lend themselves to discussions about the essential nature of the character and the conflict s/he must navigate in the text.

Structure Four: Example

I am using the excerpt from Chapter 6 and connecting to author's craft for my big picture idea.

I. Thesis (my argument): The paradoxical juxtaposition of incompatible epistemological theories defines a reality that is both rational and chaotic.

II. Simplified topic sentence for body paragraph one: Carroll describes a potentially knowable world that can be explicated and understood.

   Potential evidence: 1) Alice wants to make sense of the "Jabberwocky" poem and assumes it can be explicated; she "[puzzles]" over it, recognizing it has "ideas," though she doesn't "exactly know what they are!" 2) Humpty Dumpty is a self-styled "master" of words who "seem[s] very clever at explaining;" he "understands" the nonsense words in the poem, as well as the principle of the portmanteau logic that formed them; 3) like the Ego attempting to relate to the external world (the Reality Principle), the characters assume an objectively ordered world with rules that can be uncovered and exploited in order to achieve one's goals; knowledge is universal in this view and based in rationality

III. Simplified topic sentence for body paragraph two: At the same time, the Looking-glass world defies knowledge, as its rules governing the construction of meaning are arbitrary and capricious.

   Potential evidence: 1) Humpty Dumpty admits the poem is "hard;" his gloss on the words, even if correct, decreases comprehension of the text; it is all a load of nonsense-- revealing the poem to be about badger-like animals living in sun-dials; 2) even Alice is skeptical of his expertise and knowledge, as his gloss on meaning requires a world in which a word "means just what [Humpty Dumpty chooses] it to mean;" there is a fundamental ambiguity that cannot be parsed; 3) like the unconscious mind, meaning is based either in wishful desire (Id) or arbitrary socialization (Super-ego); it is fundamentally subjective, based in a perception that is both imposed from without and completely context driven; in this view, ambiguity cannot be resolved, since there is no access to a God's-eye view that would definitively resolve contradictions

IV. Conclusion (the big picture): Relating to external reality from the standpoint of internal perception creates a paradox of meaning. On the one hand, certainty is introduced through the introduction of definitive norms, but at the same time these norms are internalized in a completely idiosyncratic way and were never based in objective reality in the first place. Rationality, then, is more a construct than a universal law, and the "logic" of its contradictions are exposed in the juxtaposition of paradoxical ideas.