

# **Freudian Psychology**

## **Part Two: The Utility of a Psychological Reading**

## Wait? This is more than just an assignment?

Yes, believe or not, you can use this handful of Freudian concepts for many things-- up to and including on the AP test (if the text is a good fit). There are some caveats, however.

First, if you're not going to commit to actually knowing what you're talking about, it's best to limit yourself to general references and isolated analysis. I don't see why this is such a large hurdle to overcome, since I am not teaching you a lot of abstract Freudian vocabulary (believe me: it exists) or leading you very far into the weeds with these concepts, but I've learned over the years that many students are too intellectually lazy to even master the basics.

Second, some of you read Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart* in the summer, and some of you will read his *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in the second semester. Freud lies at the heart of much of his work, since the idea of another world is a recurring symbol in his work, standing broadly for the unconscious mind. In fact, this is largely why this part of the year exists: to give these students a key to writing about these texts in a more sophisticated way.

Third, you've got to get a handle on when it is and when it is not appropriate to use Freudian concepts, and this largely has to do with what kind of text you're writing about. In fact, this is my next topic.

## What Kinds of Texts Work Well with Freud?

If you're doing a full Freudian analysis, you're best off limiting yourself to 20<sup>th</sup> century writers. This is the immediate context for Freud's ideas and work, and it is the period in which he was most influential. More importantly for our purposes, it's the period in which writers were most likely to be explicitly influenced by his ideas.

When you start doing this kind of textual work with literature from earlier periods, the anachronism feels jarring, and you're probably trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. These authors will not have conceptualized the psyche in terms of the conscious and unconscious mind, and in practice, it probably means distorting the text to make it fit a framework that is fundamentally alien to its design. Ernest Jones' 1949 *Hamlet and Oedipus* is a good example of this sort of thing, where Jones argued Hamlet has barely repressed sexual feelings for his mother. Most Shakespeare scholars roll their eyes a bit at the fact that this idea still influences some stage productions of the play.

That said, if you do it tastefully, you can still use older texts if they explicitly address things like dreams, repressed sexuality, trauma, etc. It's still best, though, if the Freudian analysis is only part of a larger argument.

## Scenario One: A Focus on Freud

You will be required to do this twice in class: once with a short story and once with one of the summer reading novels. Here, the procedure is simple. Take a conflict or an aspect of characterization and explain how it is developed in terms of Freud's ideas. I say simple, but that's only in principle. The reality is that it can be difficult for students to actually do because they don't know where to start. To address this reality, I have a few of tips that might help you.

First, like all assignments where you are reading a text in terms of a theoretical framework, figure out what the limiting ideas are. In this case, it is the Freudian concepts of Id, Ego, Super-Ego, and repression (including displacement and sublimation). There will obviously be more things to notice in the text, but correspondences to these ideas are what limits your approach. Make a list of how details in the text match up to each of these ideas.

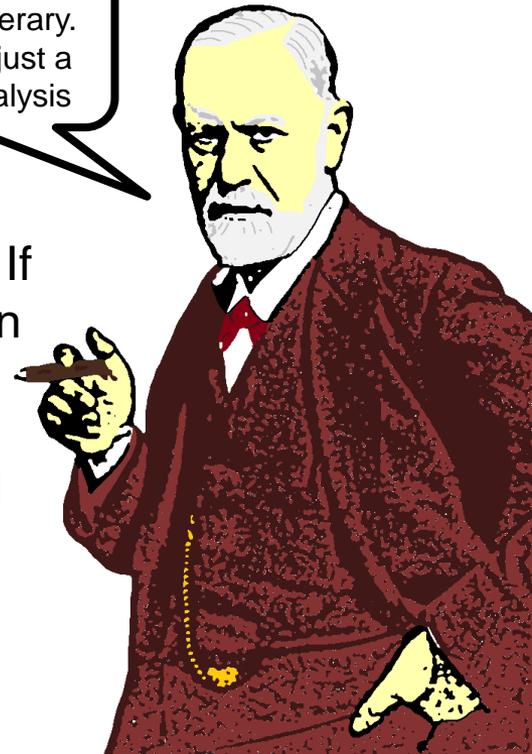
Second, narrow your approach. You are under no obligation to write about *all* of the Freudian ideas. Since you're going to have to explain both how the text works *and* how Freud works, it's silly to even try and do everything, since it's just not focused enough. Therefore, figure out which of the Freudian ideas seem to match up best with the text and choose one or two as your primary focus.

## Scenario One: A Focus on Freud

Third, decide whether your approach is going to be clinical or symbolic. If you're writing about characterization, you will be using Freud to explain why a character behaves or perceives the world in a certain way. Here, a clinical approach is probably best-- where you play psychologist and use Freudian ideas to explain what is *really* going on. In other words, this approach assumes that we think we're in control of our actions, but the reality is that our actions are governed more by unconscious drives. A symbolic approach is probably best if your focus is less on character and more on conflict or theme. This is when you are looking for metaphorical correspondences between features in the text and Freud's ideas, and your explanations will focus on how the two are alike.

Finally, given your preliminary work, decide on an argument. If you're writing an essay, this needs to be your thesis, but even if you're only producing paragraphs, you still need to have a focus. It should not be how the Freudian ideas about the mind works (this is your method of analysis); rather, it should be something to do with characterization, conflict, or theme. You still have to take some position on one of these ideas; the Freudian analysis (in explanations in body paragraphs) is going to prove your argument is correct.

The argument still needs to be literary. My ideas are just a method of analysis



## Scenario Two: A Minor Focus on Freud

You don't have to go all in with these ideas. Instead you might want to focus on one Freudian concept as a single part of a larger argument. In practice (given the scope of what we do in this class), this probably means a single paragraph.

This might also mean a less technical analysis. Maybe instead of explaining the mechanisms of the Id or Super-ego, you're focusing more broadly on the idea of the unconscious mind. Maybe you're writing about repression, but only in the broadest sense of the mind distancing itself from uncomfortable ideas. Maybe you're writing about a character who either tempts the protagonist or functions as a moral authority (like the Ego arbitrating between the Id and Super-ego).

Whether technical or not, though, if you're only devoting a portion of your argument to something Freudian, you're probably writing about a single text feature-- usually something symbolic. This could be an actual metaphor or metonym (such as an underground space meant to evoke the Id), or it could be a feature of the text which responds well to Freudian analysis (such as a dream that functions as wish fulfillment or dramatizes psychic conflict).

One word of caution: you don't want the Freudian analysis to feel like a *non sequitur*; it has to be integrated into a larger argument (instead of an argument + one little bit about Freud that is interesting, but adds nothing).

## Scenario Three: A Passing Mention

Generally I'm pretty skeptical of drive-by analysis-- where you just mention things that you have no intention of developing. That said, sometimes a mention really can clarify an argument.

This would only be true, though, if your argument does not depend on understanding *precisely* how the Freudian idea works. In other words, if following your point requires specialized vocabulary or explanation, then it's either not worth doing, or the Freudian analysis needs to be your actual focus.

Examples of when it might help to mention a Freudian idea include things like pointing out that (according to Freud) dreams can function as wish fulfillment or symbolic conflict between different parts of the psyche. Just writing this might help to clarify how a larger discussion of how correspondences between a dream and the main plot actually works, since it offers a psychological motive for why the correspondence exists in the first place.

You could obviously be more technical (writing about repression, sublimation, displacement, etc.), but you don't have to be if your real agenda lies elsewhere.

