

The Structure of the Mind According to Freud

Many of us have experienced what is commonly referred to as a **Freudian Slip**. These misstatements are believed to reveal underlying, unconscious thoughts or feelings. Consider this example:

James has just started a new relationship with a woman he met at school. While talking to her one afternoon, he accidentally calls her by his ex-girlfriend's name.

If you were in this situation, how would you explain this mistake? Many of us might blame the slip on distraction or describe it as a simple accident. However, a psychoanalytic theorist might tell you that this is much more than a random accident. The psychoanalytic view holds that there are inner forces outside of your awareness that are directing your behavior. For example, a psychoanalyst might say that James misspoke due to unresolved feelings for his ex or perhaps because of misgivings about his new relationship.

According to Freud, the mind can be divided into two main parts:

1. The conscious mind includes everything that we are aware of. This is the aspect of our mental processing that we can think and talk about rationally. A part of this includes our memory, which is not always part of consciousness but can be retrieved easily at any time and brought into our awareness. Freud called this ordinary memory the preconscious.
2. The unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict. According to Freud, the unconscious continues to influence our behavior and experience, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences.

ID, EGO, SUPEREGO

The Structural Model of Personality

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, personality is composed of three elements. These three elements of personality--known as the id, the ego, and the superego--work together to create complex human behaviors.

The Id

The id is the only component of personality that is present from birth. This aspect of personality is entirely unconscious and includes of the instinctive and primitive behaviors. According to Freud, the id is the source of all psychic energy, making it the primary component of personality.

The id is driven by the pleasure principle, which strives for immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs. If these needs are not satisfied immediately, the result is a state anxiety or tension. For example, an increase in hunger or thirst should produce an immediate attempt to eat or drink. The id is very important early in life, because it ensures that an infants needs are met. If the infant is hungry or uncomfortable, he or she will cry until the demands of the id are met.

However, immediately satisfying these needs is not always realistic or even possible. If we were ruled entirely by the pleasure principle, we might find ourselves grabbing things we want out of

other people's hands to satisfy our own cravings. This sort of behavior would be both disruptive and socially unacceptable. According to Freud, the id tries to resolve the tension created by the pleasure principle through the primary process, which involves forming a mental image of the desired object as a way of satisfying the need.

The Ego

The ego is the component of personality that is responsible for dealing with reality. According to Freud, the ego develops from the id and ensures that the impulses of the id can be expressed in a manner acceptable in the real world. The ego functions in both the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind.

The ego operates based on the reality principle, which strives to satisfy the id's desires in realistic and socially appropriate ways. The reality principle weighs the costs and benefits of an action before deciding to act upon or abandon impulses. In many cases, the id's impulses can be satisfied through a process of delayed gratification--the ego will eventually allow the behavior, but only in the appropriate time and place.

The ego also discharges tension created by unmet impulses through the secondary process, in which the ego tries to find an object in the real world that matches the mental image created by the id's primary process.

The Superego

The last component of personality to develop is the superego. The superego is the aspect of personality that holds all of our internalized moral standards and ideals that we acquire from both parents and society--our sense of right and wrong. The superego and provides guidelines for making judgments. According to Freud, the superego begins to emerge at around age five.

There are two parts of the superego:

1. The ego ideal includes the rules and standards for good behaviors. These behaviors include those which are approved of by parental and other authority figures. Obeying these rules leads to feelings of pride, value, and accomplishment.
2. The conscience includes information about things that are viewed as bad by parents and society. These behaviors are often forbidden and lead to bad consequences, punishments, or feelings of guilt and remorse.

The superego acts to perfect and civilize our behavior. It works to suppress all unacceptable urges of the id and struggles to make the ego act upon idealistic standards rather than upon realistic principles. The superego is present in the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious.

The Interaction of the Id, Ego, and Superego

With so many competing forces, it is easy to see how conflict might arise between the id, ego, and superego. Freud used the term ego strength to refer to the ego's ability to function despite these dueling forces. A person with good ego strength is able to effectively manage these pressures, while those with too much or too little ego strength can become too unyielding or too disrupting.

According to Freud, the key to a healthy personality is a balance between the id, the ego, and the superego.

Psychoanalytic criticism:

Main things psychoanalytic critics (that's you) do.

1. They look at literature as an expression of desires and emotions. They do not tend to be shy about making claims about the author's secret mental life, even if they do not know the author's life very well, because they assume that everyone's unconscious is structured basically the same. Thus, they might say that through Lord of the Flies author William Golding is really venting anger towards schoolboys (he used to be a teacher) or that Shakespeare is releasing a certain hatred for women in Hamlet. If a writer includes a sex scene, it is often interpreted as a disguised sex-wish. Maybe the author wishes to fantasize about someone who is "in disguise" as a character in the book. Thus the desires and emotions that the author is "secretly venting" in the act of writing are often anti-social: the desire for sex, violence – or the desire to be alone, or the desire to die (the so-called "death-wish").

➤ So does the book really show the author's desire to ... have sex with someone, hurt someone, be revenged on someone, be alone, escape, die and leave behind all effort and pressures...and so on?

2. Psychoanalytic critics wonder how the forces of the super-ego and the id are being played out in the book. Are there symbols for these forces in the text or do certain characters represent them in some way? Example psychoanalytic read of 1984 by Orwell:

Big Brother = super-ego, the ever-present watchdog that tries to control behaviour

Winston = the id, the anti-social force of individual desire who wishes to be free from society

Winston's rebellion = the secret desire to be free from the controlling eyes of society.

Julia = sexual desire

The forest = desire for return to the womb, a natural state of unpressured innocence.

The party = symbol of paranoid fear of persecution

O'Brien = Father who punishes the child when child does something bad.

➤ So is there a way of reading the book, or parts of it, as a drama/conflict played out between the forces of society, rules, law, order, morality (the super-ego) and the forces of the lawless, lustful, uncontrollable and unrestrained (the id), which Freud said is ultimately the drama played out in every human mind?

3. Psychoanalytic critics believe that our FATHERS and MOTHERS dominate our consciousness, because for our first views of life they were almost EVERYTHING. While our brains were being molded, they were always there, and they shaped our reality. So literature (any human expression) is full of mother and father obsessions and images – sometimes in disguise. Look for obsession with the mother as saviour (Mary) and the father as stern but revered figure of law (God). Freud thought that the Christian God was really a metaphor for Dad who punishes but is also caring. Freud also thought that boys often conceive a hatred for Father who gets some of Mother's love too and sometimes slaps your wrist and says "you can't do that". Therefore a death-wish for the father and all father figures is common. Is this not almost explicitly dramatized in Hamlet, for example?

➤ so are there characters who are clearly symbols for Mother and Father in the book? Also, is any desire for attachment to these figures manifested? Moreover, is there a sense of loss or anger: feeling betrayed by Mother and Father figures and resenting them or wanting revenge on them. (Because Freud felt that growing up and having to become independent is hard, psychologically: it creates anger, resentment, feelings of abandonment and being forced out of their love and into a mold)

4. Psychoanalytic critics say that literature is like a dream. So is the book dream-like in that it breaks time, has strange, "irrational" sequences, uses symbolism and, most of all, fulfills wishes?

➤ so read the book as if it were the dream of someone who asked you: "what does my dream mean"?

5. The effect on the reader. Because Freud believed that the unconscious and its symbolism is a kind of universal language, what affected the writer should affect the reader (who's paying attention) in the same way.

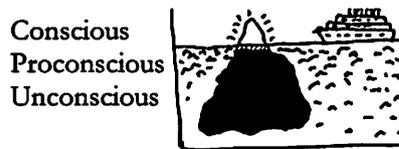
➤ So if parts of the book were powerful for you, wonder why. Freud thought that, for example, a scene that plays out the emotions that came from the author's being neglected by his/her father will have a powerful effect on anyone, but especially someone who felt acutely neglected by their father. In this way, doing a psychoanalytic read sometimes means not just psychoanalyzing the author, but yourself, the reader, as well.

Psychoanalytic Criticism

THE UNCONSCIOUS

Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of applied psychoanalysis, a science concerned with the interaction between conscious and unconscious processes and with the laws of mental functioning.

We are not, then, aware of everything that is going on in our minds. Not only that, we are aware of only a little that is going on in our minds—only a small portion of our mental lives is accessible to us.



It has frequently been suggested that an individual's mental life can be represented by an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg, that part seen above the water, is what the person is conscious of. The remainder of the iceberg, by far the greater part of it, lies hidden beneath the water. Although it is not seen, it is still there. "What is in your mind," Freud (1963) notes, "is not identical with what you are conscious of; whether something is going on in your mind and whether you hear of it, are two different things" (p. 189).

This means that we are not in complete control of ourselves all the time, we are affected by events and circumstances in ways we cannot fathom, and we do things for reasons we do not understand or will not admit to ourselves. In short, we are not completely rational creatures who act only on the basis of logic and intelligence, but instead are vulnerable to emotional and other kinds of non-rational or irrational appeals.

But why, you may ask, don't we become conscious of all that is going on in our minds? Why does all this material elude us? Why do our minds play such tricks on us? Freud offers an explanation that is both obvious (once it is pointed out) and ingenious: We *repress* this material because we do not want, for a variety of reasons, to become conscious of it. It would cause us pain or guilt or some other unpleasant feeling. Thus we create a barrier between our consciousness and our unconscious and do not allow repressed material to pass through that barrier.

Dichter (1964) offers an example of the way in which unconscious desires and forces operate in a discussion of cigarette lighters:

The reliability of a lighter is important because it is integrally connected with the basic [read "unconscious"] reason for using a lighter. (p. 341)

Let me interrupt here to ask what you think this "basic reason" might be. The answer most people would give would be "That's obvious—to light cigarettes." But that is the conscious, or "manifest," reason. The basic, or "real," reason and the "latent" and unconscious reason are sometimes entirely different.

Let us return to Dichter, who tells us why people use lighters:

The basic reason for using a lighter [is] ... the desire for mastery and power. The capacity to summon fire inevitably gives every human being, child or grownup, a sense of power. Reasons go far back into man's history. Fire and the ability to command it are prized because they are associated not only with warmth, but also with life itself. As attested to by the Greek legend of Prometheus and many other myths, the ability to control fire is an age-old symbol of man's conquest of the physical world he inhabits.

A cigarette lighter provides conspicuous evidence of this ability to summon fire. The ease and speed with which the lighter works enhances the feeling of power. The failure of a lighter to work does not just create superficial social embarrassment, it frustrates a deep-seated desire for a feeling of mastery and control. (p. 341)

Thus cigarette lighters are important to people because lighters fulfill powerful but unconscious needs and desires. The same can be said of many of the films we see, television programs we watch, novels we read, and other art forms we find so necessary to our lives. All of these things feed our unconscious lives, our psyches, in ways that few people understand.

SYMBOLS

Psychoanalysis is, remember, an interpretive art. It seeks to find meaning in the behavior of people and in the arts they create. One way we can apply psychoanalytic theory is by understanding how the psyche works and learning how to interpret the hidden significance of what people and characters in fiction do. We

ask ourselves questions, such as, "What does it mean when Hamlet says this or that?" or "What does it mean when Hamlet is unable to act?" We want to know *why*.

This is where symbols come in. Symbols are things that stand for other things, many of which are hidden or at least not obvious. A symbol can stand for an institution, a mode of thought, an idea, a wish any number of things. Heroes and heroines are often symbolic and thus can be interpreted in terms of all the things they stand for. And much of what is most interesting about symbols is their relation to the unconscious. Symbols are keys that enable us to unlock the doors shielding our unconscious feelings and beliefs from scrutiny.

Symbols are messages from our unconscious.

Interpreting symbols can involve a number of difficulties. (I might point out that there are many different theories in psychology about symbols, and they have, like many other aspects of psychoanalytic thought, generated a great deal of controversy.) First, symbols are often ambivalent and can be explained in varying ways depending on one's orientation. For instance, some people see Hamlet's inability to act as symbolic of the power of an unresolved Oedipus complex, whereas others believe that it symbolizes his skepticism and over-intellectualism. Some think that Hamlet is paralyzed by grief; others think he is insane.

Symbols may be classified as conventional, accidental, or universal. *Conventional* symbols are words that we learn that stand for things. In contrast to these are *accidental* symbols, which are personal, private, and connected to an individual's life history. For example, for a man who fell in love for the first time in Paris, Paris may become an accidental symbol for love. (The accidental symbols found in dreams are what make the interpretation of dreams so complicated, although dreams contain more than accidental symbols.) Finally, *universal* symbols are those that are rooted in the experience of all people. Many of these are connected to our bodies and to natural processes. Attempting to understand symbols is often complicated by the fact that the logic behind symbolization is frequently not the same logic that people use in their everyday reasoning processes.

Sexuality

Freud calls the "force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind" the *libido*. This term should be understood broadly, and not as being restricted only to sexual relations; that is, *libido* refers to various kinds of sensual pleasures and gratifications. According to Freud, all individuals pass through four stages in their development: the oral, the anal, the phallic, and the genital. In *The Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis* these stages are described as follows:

The mouth represents an erotogenic zone for the infant. Sucking and later eating represent the gratification of oral needs. The fact that the infant often sucks a pacifier indicates that he is not only concerned with the incorporation of calories. When the infant begins to have teeth, the need to bite expresses his sadistic desires. The second stage of development is usually referred to as the sadistic-anal, and is characterized by the infant's interest in excreting or retaining his stools. Finally, the third stage is referred to as the phallic, in which the boy and the girl in their genitals. The boy's interest in his genital appears to be responsible for his positive Oedipus complex, which is finally dissolved by the fear of castration. The girl reacts with male's organ envy, if she considers hers to be an inferior organ to his.

According to psychoanalytic theory, every individual passes through a stage in which he or she desires the parent of the opposite sex—all of this, of course, on an unconscious level. Most people learn to master their Oedipus complexes; neurotic individuals are plagued by theirs. In little boys this mastery is aided by an unconscious fear of castration—castration anxiety—and in little girls it is aided by jealousy of men and what is termed penis envy.

Little boys, according to Freudian theory, sexualize their love for their mothers and wish to displace their fathers and monopolize their mothers' affection. Their fear of retaliation by their fathers then leads them to renounce their love of their mothers, to identify with the masculinity of their fathers, to re-channel their love outside of the family, and to direct their interest toward other females.

With little girls, the situation is different. They do not have to fear castration (some theorists suggest that they believe they have already lost their genitals) and so do not relinquish their Oedipal desires as quickly as boys do. But girls do fear the loss of the love of both their parents, and so avoid this loss by re-identifying with their mothers and turning, eventually, to males other than their fathers as a means of obtaining babies (and, indirectly, their lost genitals).