3.2: Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: An Overview

“Do I wake or sleep?” Keats’s question is perplexing, one we have probably asked ourselves. For our dreams often seem as real as our waking life. We dream, we wake, and we try to recollect our dream, which somehow seems to tell us something that we should know. We may tell friends our dreams, especially those strange ones that haunt our imagination, and they may venture an interpretation for us by reading our dream. Dreams are stories of our mind, albeit often bewildering narratives in need of interpretation.

Your Process

1. Keep a dream journal for at least one week, jotting down those dreams that you can remember most vividly.
2. Take one of your dreams and analyze it like a story: What is the plot? Who are the characters? What symbols seem to be operating in the dream-story?
3. Now try to understand your dream: What might be the theme of your dream-story?

Psychoanalytical literary criticism, on one level, concerns itself with dreams, for dreams are a reflection of the unconscious psychological states of dreamers. Freud, for example, contends that dreams are “the guardians of sleep” where they become “disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes.” Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, (New York: Norton, 1989). To Freud, dreams are the “royal road” to the personal unconscious of the dreamer and have a direct relation to literature, which often has the structure of a dream. Jacques Lacan, a disciple of Freud, was influenced by Freud’s psychoanalytical theories and contended that dreams mirrored our unconscious and reflected the way we use language; dreams, therefore, operate like language, having their own rhetorical qualities. Another Freud disciple, Carl Jung, eventually rejected Freud’s theory that dreams are manifestations of the personal unconsciously, claiming, instead, that they reflect archetypes that tap into the “collective unconsciousness” of all humanity. Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay,
In this chapter, we explore three popular psychoanalytical approaches for interpreting literature—Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian. In general, there are four ways to focus a psychoanalytical interpretation:

1. You can analyze the author’s life.
2. You can analyze the thematic content of the work, especially the motivations of characters and the narrator(s).
3. You can analyze the artistic construction of a text.
4. You can analyze yourself or the reader of the literary work using reader-response theory, which we examine in detail in Chapter 6.

Here is a quick overview of some psychoanalytical interpretations that demonstrate these approaches.

### Analyze the Author’s Life

In *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1933), Marie Bonaparte psychoanalyzes Poe, concluding that his fiction and poetry are driven by his desire to be reunited with his dead mother (she died when he was three). Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Image Publishing, 1949). This desire leaves him symbolically castrated, unable to have normal relationships with others (primarily women). Bonaparte analyzes Poe’s stories from this perspective, reading them as dreams reflecting Poe’s repressed desires for his mother. While such an interpretation is fascinating—and can be quite useful—you probably won’t attempt to get into the mind of the author for a short paper. But you will find, however, that examining the life of an author can be a fruitful enterprise, for there may be details from an author’s life that might become useful evidence in your paper.

You can find out about Poe at the Poe Museum’s website ([http://www.poemuseum.org/index.php](http://www.poemuseum.org/index.php)).

### Analyze the Thematic Content: The Motivations of Characters and the Narrator(s)

An example showing a psychoanalytic focus on literary characters is Frederick Crews’s reading in *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* (1966). Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Crews first provides a psychoanalytical reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s life: he sees reflected in Hawthorne’s characters a thwarted Oedipus complex (no worries, we’ll define that a bit later), which creates repression. Furthermore, Hawthorne’s ties to the Puritan past engenders his work with a profound sense of guilt, further repressing characters. Crews reads “The Birthmark,” for example, as a tale of sexual repression. Crews’s study is a model for psychoanalyzing characters in fiction and remains a powerful and persuasive interpretation.

You can read “The Birthmark,” Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birthmark,” in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Modern Library ed., ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Random House, 1937; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1996), [etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/HawBirt.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/HawBirt.html). which will become the story of choice for the three student sample papers in this chapter, at [etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/HawBirt.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/HawBirt.html).
Analyze the Artistic Construction


Analyze the Reader

Finally, a psychoanalytical reading can examine the reader and how a literary work is interpreted according to the psychological needs of the reader. We examine this approach in detail in Chapter 6 on reader-response criticism.

Your Process

add here

1. Choose three authors and/or literary works that you think might be fruitful for applying the first three psychoanalytical approaches (remember, we’ll learn about the fourth approach in reader-response theory).
2. Now jot down two reasons why you think your author and/or work might work well with these theories.
3. Keep this material, for you may have already developed an idea for your paper, which you’ll be ready to write after reading the rest of this chapter.