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## Chapter 3

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# Writing about Character and Motivation: Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the varieties of psychoanalytic literary theories.
2. Apply a psychoanalytic theory to a literary work.
3. Engage in the writing process of a peer writer, including peer review.
4. Review and evaluate a variety of model papers by peer writers.
5. Draft and revise a psychoanalytic paper on a literary work.

### 3.1 Literary Snapshot: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*

We are becoming acquainted more and more with our young hero Alice, who has had some literary theory adventures in [Chapter 1 "Introduction: What Is Literary Theory and Why Should I Care?"](#) and [Chapter 2 "Writing about Form: Developing the Foundations of Close Reading"](#). Let's continue our journey with Alice in this chapter as we explore psychoanalytic literary criticism. We'll provide the links to Carroll's text again, just in case:

<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarGlas.html>

When Alice tumbles down the rabbit-hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), she enters a fantasy realm that is quite different from her world of the here-and-now:

Down, down, down. There was nothing else to do, so Alice soon began talking again. "Dinah'll miss me very much to-night, I should think!" (Dinah was the cat.) "I hope they'll remember her saucer of milk at tea-time. Dinah, my dear, I wish you were down here with me! There are no mice in the air, I'm afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that's very like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder?" And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, "Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?" and sometimes, "Do bats eat cats?" for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it. She felt that she was dozing off, and had just begun to dream that she was walking hand in hand with Dinah, and saying to her very earnestly, "Now, Dinah, tell me the truth: did you ever eat a bat?" when suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of dry leaves, and the fall was over. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 1, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>.

Her adventures are described as a dream, and she exclaims after the fall that it was all "Curiouser and curiouser!"

In *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), Alice, after entering Looking-Glass Land via a magic mirror, encounters two odd brothers, Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Alice and the brothers come upon the Red King, who is snoring:

“It’s only the Red King snoring,” said Tweedledee.

“Come and look at him!” the brothers cried, and they each took one of Alice’s hands, and led her up to where the King was sleeping.

“Isn’t he a lovely sight?” said Tweedledum. Alice couldn’t say honestly that he was. He had a tall red night-cap on, with a tassel, and he was lying crumpled up into a sort of untidy heap, and snoring loud—“fit to snore his head off!” as Tweedledum remarked.

“I’m afraid he’ll catch cold with lying on the damp grass,” said Alice, who was a very thoughtful little girl.

“He’s dreaming now,” said Tweedledee: “and what do you think he’s dreaming about?”

Alice said, “Nobody can guess that.”

“Why, about you!” Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. “And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you’d be?”

“Where I am now, of course,” said Alice.

“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You’d be nowhere. Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his dream!”

“If that there King was to wake,” added Tweedledum, “you’d go out—bang!—just like a candle!”

“I shouldn’t!” Alice exclaimed indignantly. “Besides, if *I’m* only a sort of thing in his dream, what are *you*, *I* should like to know?”

“Ditto,” said Tweedledum.

“Ditto, ditto!” cried Tweedledee.

He shouted this so loud that Alice couldn’t help saying, “Hush! You’ll be waking him, I’m afraid, if you make so much noise.”

“Well, it’s no use *your* talking about waking him,” said Tweedledum, “when you’re only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you’re not real.”

“I *am* real!” said Alice, and began to cry.

“You won’t make yourself a bit realer by crying,” Tweedledee remarked: “there’s nothing to cry about.” Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (New York: Macmillan, 1899; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1993), chap. 4, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarGlas.html>.

The dream in Looking-Glass Land seems more a nightmare for Alice, for she is scared that she is merely a figment of someone’s dream, their imagination—that’s an idea that might bring us all to tears!

We all have dreams, and we recognize that dreams often mirror the oddness and nonsense that Alice encounters in Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land. Dreams, in fact, are central to psychoanalytic literary criticism and have become the stuff of popular psychology, where dream interpretation continues to be a lucrative industry, as seen at Dream-Books.net (<http://dream-books.net/popPsychology-dream-books.html>).

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, famously defines dreams as the “road to the unconsciousness” in his monumental work *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

So let’s enter the wacky and wonderful world of psychoanalytic literary criticism with a few more excerpts from literature:

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Globe ed., ed. William George Clark and William Aldis Wright (1866; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MobTemp.html>.

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Is *all* that we see or seem

But a dream within a dream? Edgar Allan Poe, “A Dream within a Dream,” PoemHunter.org, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-dream-within-a-dream>.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “A Dream within a Dream”

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919; Bartleby.com, 1999), <http://www.bartleby.com/101/624.html>.

—John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”

## 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 a 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 unconsciousness, 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, (New York: Norton, 1989).

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 "Writing about Readers: Applying Reader-Response Theory"](#).

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>).

### **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), <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HawBirt.html>. which will become the story of choice for the three student sample papers in this chapter, at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HawBirt.html>.

### **Analyze the Artistic Construction**

Jacques Lacan shows us how a psychoanalytical reading can focus on the formal, artistic construction of a literary text. In other words, Lacan believes that our unconscious is “structured like a language” and that a literary text mirrors this sense of the unconscious. In “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (you can access the essay at <http://www.lacan.com/purloined.htm>), Lacan argues that Edgar Allan Poe’s tale is not necessarily about the meaning of the message in the stolen letter; rather, the tale is about who controls the letter, who has power over the language contained in the letter. Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” Lacan.com, <http://www.lacan.com/purloined.htm>. You can read “The Purloined Letter” Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London: J. M. Dent, 1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1994), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PoePurl.html>. at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PoePurl.html>.

### **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 "Writing about Readers: Applying Reader-Response Theory"](#) on reader-response criticism.

### YOUR PROCESS

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.

### 3.3 Focus on Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): Unconscious Repressed Desire

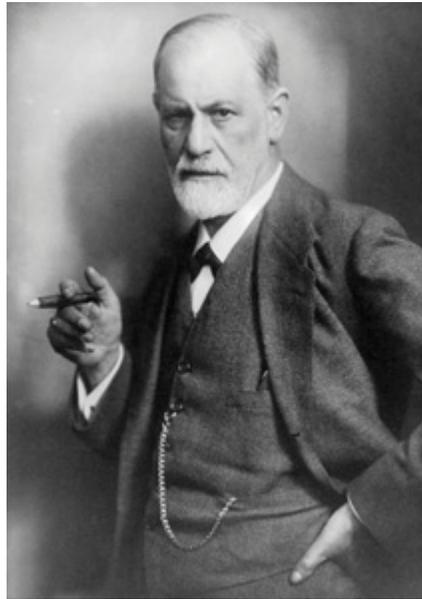


Photo by Max Halberstadt, 1922.

“Freud is inescapable. It may be a commonplace by now that we all speak Freud whether we know it or not, but the commonplace remains both true and important. Freud’s terminology and his essential ideas pervade contemporary ways of thinking about human feelings and conduct.” So writes Peter Gay, a recent biographer of Freud, in his introduction to *The Freud Reader* (1989). Peter Gay, "Introduction" in *The Freud Reader*, (New York: Norton, 1989) pg. xiii.

Gay is certainly correct: Freud is part of our everyday vocabulary: the “Oedipal complex” and “slips-of-the-tongue” are two Freudian concepts with which you are probably familiar already.

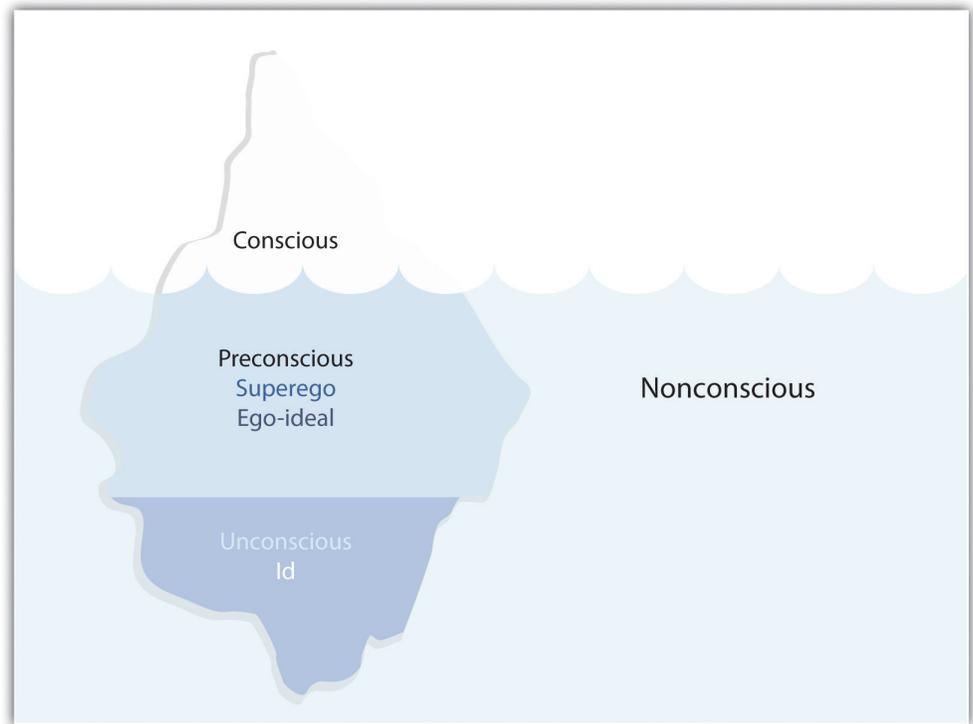
1. The driving force of all humans that centers on desire, particularly sexual desire.
2. The moral or social forces that provide a moral code and restrict the pleasure principle.
3. The part of our mind that is buried deep within consciousness and seeks outlets.

Freud’s legacy resides in his theory of human sexual development. He believes humans are driven by the **pleasure principle**<sup>1</sup>, where sexual desires and aggressive behavior are controlled by the **reality principle**<sup>2</sup>, the so-called restrictions we follow to conform to proper behavior. Consequently, our drive for unbridled pleasure is repressed by the reality principle and becomes sublimated or buried in the **unconscious**<sup>3</sup>. Initially, Freud categorized the mind according to three levels: the conscious (what we remember), the preconscious (what we can easily retrieve from our memory), and the unconscious (what cannot be retrieved into

consciousness). Freud’s map of the mind focuses on the tension between the conscious and the unconscious.

Ultimately, much of Freudian psychoanalysis concerns itself with how the unconsciousness attempts to break through the repression barrier and enter consciousness. A popular way to view the tension between the conscious and the unconscious is to imagine an iceberg:

Figure 3.1 Freud’s Conception of the Human Psyche



\*Note: Ego is free-floating in all three levels.

4. The “it” of life force for humans—the center of our instincts, our libido, our desires.
5. The “I” that seeks to balance the opposing forces of the id and the superego.
6. The moral code that reflects a variety of authority—social, parental, religious.

In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud further defines his conception of the mind. He theorizes that the mind contains the **id**<sup>4</sup>, the **ego**<sup>5</sup>, and the **superego**<sup>6</sup> (or the **ego-ideal**). Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams in The Freud Reader*, (New York: Norton, 1989) p. 630–638. The id (the “it”) is the center of our instincts, our libido, which naturally seeks gratification, and is driven by the pleasure principle; the id is primarily sexual and aggressive in nature, purely biological. In turn, the superego (the “above me”) is the moral conscience—the “law”—that tells us what is right or wrong, permissible or not permissible. The superego is constructed from parental authority, societal law, religious prohibitions, and so on; is societal; and is driven by

the reality principle. It follows, then, that the ego (the “I”) is the moderator of the id (pleasure) and the superego (moral conscience). In other words, the ego is the compromise of the id and the superego, a delicate balance of the mind.

Freud posits that mental illnesses result from a faulty ego, one unable to accept the id-superego push and pull. If the mind is unable to release those repressed desires through some outlet, then a person can develop a mental illness—various neuroses like psychosis, paranoia, and schizophrenia. The goal of this chapter is not to provide you with an overview of Freudian psychoanalysis as it relates to treating mental illness; instead, our goal is to show you how to apply Freud’s theories to the interpretation of literature.

Central to Freud’s schematic of the mind is the **Oedipal or Oedipus complex**<sup>7</sup> (OC), for it is the OC that ultimately forms the ego. To Freud, all humans pass through three stages of sexual development. During the **oral stage**<sup>8</sup>, a child is one with its libido, its sexual desire satisfied by oral sucking, particularly of the mother’s breast. Continued thumb-sucking during childhood, for example, represents a child not completely through the oral stage of development. Next, the child passes through the **anal stage**<sup>9</sup>, whereby it experiences the mastery of its own bodily functions, gaining pleasure from the ability to control bodily functions. Freud believes the anal stage is primarily aggressive and leads to the desire for mastery over others. Those who have read William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) will recognize that the stranded children are stuck in the anal stage without any authority to control them, especially after the breaking of the conch shell. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (New York: Penguin, 1984). Finally, the child enters the **phallic stage**<sup>10</sup>, where the child’s sexual desire is concentrated on the genitals, which become an erogenous zone that fulfills pleasure. In effect, the oral, anal, and phallic stages reflect libidinal sexual desires central to the pleasure principle.

7. The process of sexual development for boys defined by desire for the mother and feeling threatened by the father.

8. Stage in which a child is driven to incorporate objects with himself or herself, thus creating wholeness and unity.

9. Aggressive stage of development in which a child learns control of the bodily functions.

10. Stage in which a child discovers his or her sexual organs—specifically, the presence or lack of a penis—and begins sexual development.

Enter the father. Enter the reality principle. Enter the OC. The OC comes directly from Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, a tragedy about the hero Oedipus, who learns from the Delphic oracle that he will kill his father and marry his mother; he tries to avoid the prophecy, only to fall victim to patricide and incest. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007). Unknowingly, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. After learning what he has done, Oedipus blinds himself in penance of his horrific deeds. Now that’s a twisted tale! Freud’s OC approximates the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*: the boy, as Freud tells us, has a desire for the mother and begins to see the father as a threat to this desire. Thus the boy wishes to rid himself of his father and possess the mother. The father, symbolic of the law or lawgiver, steps in and, with the threat of castration or emasculation, turns the boy away from the mother. The boy then represses his desire for his mother (and his desire to be rid of the father) into the unconscious. In a sense, the father represents the superego, the authority. By successfully negotiating the OC, the boy is gendered; he

learns how to direct his sexual desire to appropriate objects and usually grows into a healthy sexual human being.

What of the girl, you ask? Well, you probably shouldn't ask. Freud's OC is highly sexist. At one point in his career Freud referred to women as the "dark continent," and he is known most for his rhetorical question: "What does a woman want?" Indeed, Freud did not have an answer, and many feminists would argue that he didn't even have a clue! He does not provide an adequate explanation for the girl's journey through the process; in fact, Freud claims that the girl has an easier route through the OC since she accepts the notion of castration because she doesn't have the male appendage. In other words, the girl, already symbolically castrated, does not fear the father; instead, she turns toward the father for the missing phallus, her completion, and thus rivals the mother for the father's affection. You can probably see why nearly all of Freud's critics have recognized the limitations of his claims about women.

At this point you may be shaking your head in skeptical amazement, for Freud's theories do tax the imagination. One major critique of Freud is that we cannot verify his theories empirically. In other words, we are asked to believe Freud because he tells us to believe him. For literary critics, however, this theory—or story—that Freud creates, one that he develops from reading literature (*Oedipus Rex*), has tantalizing possibilities for literary interpretation.

There's a bit more to Freud that we'll want to examine—dreams—but let's look at another use of the Freudian OC in literary analysis. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975) provides a provocative—and controversial—case for a Freudian interpretation of literature, in this case fairy tales. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1976). Bettelheim contends that fairy tales often depict Oedipal tensions. Let's look at one example, "Jack and the Beanstalk," which you can read at [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/English\\_Fairy\\_Tales/Jack\\_and\\_the\\_Beanstalk](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/English_Fairy_Tales/Jack_and_the_Beanstalk). "Jack and the Beanstalk," in *English Fairy Tales*, 3rd ed., ed. Joseph Jacobs (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890), [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/English\\_Fairy\\_Tales/Jack\\_and\\_the\\_Beanstalk](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/English_Fairy_Tales/Jack_and_the_Beanstalk).

This tale exemplifies a child's journey through the OC. The beanstalk, symbolizing the phallus, is a metaphor for fatherly authority. Jack's stealing of the goose that lays the golden egg from the giant and subsequent cutting down of the beanstalk, which leads to the giant's demise, symbolizes Jack's freedom from the fear of the fatherly authority as he becomes his own person, his own man. By chopping down the beanstalk, then, Jack symbolically castrates the giant and is able to give up his pleasurable desire for the land of plenty on top of the beanstalk and live in the

world of reality. Of course, it helps to have that goose. If fairy tales suggest Freudian designs, as Bettelheim tells us, then it seems reasonable other literature may reflect Oedipal desires. Thus a psychoanalytic reading of a text may lead to some illuminating conclusions. As with any Freudian readings, there are those who will reject Freud's very premises, and this is true with Bettelheim, for many fairy-tale scholars have looked at the limits of his claims. Yet they are still powerful.

We must add another dimension to Freud's theory to complete its frame, which will come full circle and connect us to Alice's concern that she is a dream of the Red King. To summarize Freudian theory so far, the human mind is structured around the id-ego-superego triad that represents the tension between the pleasure and the reality principle; the ego is the moderator between pleasure and reality and is formed by entering the OC. The ego balances the id and superego by repressing those id desires that are not socially acceptable—which includes the desire for the mother—into the unconscious. To remain psychologically healthy, according to Freud, the human mind must be able to let those repressed desires escape. Slips of the tongue and jokes are two outlets. Think of dirty jokes. By telling a dirty joke or laughing at one, we are able to alleviate our fears or laugh at something that is normally not permissible. Think of a slip of the tongue, where you are repressing some desire that unconsciously slips out in normal conversation. A clever definition of such a slip is as follows: *It's when you say one thing, but mean a mother. Get it?*



Illustration by Herbert Cole for Ernest Rhys's *Fairy Gold: A Book of Old English Fairy Tales* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906).

Yet there is one other outlet that is vital to Freud: dreams. They are the primary outlets for these repressed desires, the "royal road," as Freud expressed it, to the unconscious.

11. The overall structure of our dreams, made up of the latent content, manifest content, and secondary revision.
12. The unregulated desire that is deep inside us and is often threatening to us.
13. Stage of the dreamwork where structure is brought to the latent content.
14. The dream we remember, placed in a fable or story-form structure.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the importance of dreams to psychoanalytic literary criticism. And Freud's theory of dreams may be his most important contribution to literary analysis. Freud defines dreams as hidden ways of accessing repressed wishes or desires. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is Freud's masterwork on dream interpretation. If dreams are fulfillments of repressed wishes and desires, then dreams provide a means for the pleasure principle—the id—to have a convenient outlet. Freud identifies the **dreamwork**<sup>11</sup> as constructed of the **latent content**<sup>12</sup>, the **manifest content**<sup>13</sup>, and the **secondary revision**<sup>14</sup>. The latent content is like a bubbling cauldron of desire, so deep and seething that it appears unintelligible. To bring some meaning to this cauldron, the dreamwork operates by

allowing the manifest content to provide a structure for the latent content; the manifest content orders and arranges the dream into a story that uses images and symbols to convey meaning. To continue with our analogy, as the dreamer looks into the bubbling cauldron of the latent content, he or she takes a ladle and dips into the cauldron and pours latent content into a bowl, the bowl representing the manifest content, a smaller and more structured container. Literal food for thought!

The primary recipe for such symbolization and image making is a dash of **condensation**<sup>15</sup> (compression of information) and a tablespoon of **displacement**<sup>16</sup> (placing desire onto a safe/other object). Condensation operates by taking two or more images and compressing them into a composite picture (i.e., a dream where a person looks like an amalgam of other people you know). Displacement, on the other hand, operates by substituting one thing or image for another (i.e., Freud once interpreted a car to represent the autoeroticism of the dreamer). Secondary revision, finally, is the dream the dreamer remembers and attempts to interpret (or have someone else interpret); during the secondary revision, any gaps or illogicalities of the dream from the manifest content is filled in and smoothed over—the dreamer revises the story to make it more literary, to imbue it with more sense. Another way to see secondary revision is to view it as interpretation: as we interpret a dream, we interpret a piece of literature. If a dream has a narrative structure, then it follows that it requires reading and interpreting, making a dream similar to a poem, play, short story, or novel.

15. When two or more images or things are compressed into one composite image or thing.
16. Placing desire onto another, safe object or outlet.
17. Symbol that represents the male/masculine power, usually sharp, long objects.
18. Symbols that represent the female/feminine power, usually round objects.
19. Defense mechanism in which one forgets—or, alternately, actively refuses to think about—something that was unpleasant or traumatic.
20. Defense mechanism in which one channels one's emotions into a socially acceptable outlet rather than the outlet that one might prefer but is not considered appropriate.

In *On Dreams* (1914), Freud provides some strategies for reading dreams by discussing various symbols that work by condensation and displacement and become dramatized or put into a story form. Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams* (New York: Cosimo, 2010). A central dream symbol, one that is essential to the OC, is the **phallic symbol**<sup>17</sup>—guns, knives, swords, pens, even a banana. Related to the phallic symbol is the **yonic symbol**<sup>18</sup>, any round object or object of fecundity that may symbolize female fertility—symbols of the womb. Some symbols become more universal: agricultural images represent fertilization, as do spring and summer. Be forewarned: not everything in a text is a phallic or yonic symbol. Freudian symbol hunting can at times be a dangerous occupation, for every pen—say the one you are probably holding in your hand right now—is not necessarily a phallic symbol, even if as some Freudians pun: “Pen-is power”! Freud once said that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but that leaves open the possibility that sometimes that cigar might mean something else.

Freud also suggests that the dream symbolism of condensation and displacement also operates through various defense mechanisms or coping strategies that we use every day. **Repression**<sup>19</sup> (forgetting or refusing to think about something that was unpleasant or traumatic); **sublimation**<sup>20</sup> (channeling one's emotions into a socially

acceptable outlet); **projection**<sup>21</sup> (assigning one's own feelings to someone else); **reaction formation**<sup>22</sup> (expressing the opposite of what one really feels); and **rationalization**<sup>23</sup> (trying to justify something, to explain it away) are other ways for the mind to grapple with unconscious desires that haunt the psyche. And Freud contends that as the mind is split between the unconscious and the conscious, this schism is a product of the two great motivating factors—**Eros**<sup>24</sup> (desire, sexual intimacy, love) and **Thanatos**<sup>25</sup> (death, the fear and attraction of death). That our desire for life will ultimately be defeated by the inevitable reality of death is a central concern that leads to repression.

Freud's psychoanalytic theories have been extremely influential to literary criticism. Dreams are, after all, like literature in need of interpretation. In fact, argues Freud, literature operates like a dream. In "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), Freud specifically connects psychoanalysis to literature and literary interpretation. Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *On Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,"* ed. Peter Fonagy, Ethel Spector Person, and Servulo A. Figueira (London: Karnac, 1995). A writer is a dreamer, finding outlets for his or her unconscious, repressed desires. As reader and interpreter of a literary work, then, you gain pleasure from reading. We see in [Chapter 6 "Writing about Readers: Applying Reader-Response Theory"](#) that reader-response interpretation approximates Freud's reader "wish-fulfillment" as a textual strategy.

In general, Freudian literary criticism is a powerful critical lens to use when viewing much literature. You have at your disposal a wide array of literary tools to use: repression of the conscious mind into the unconscious, pleasure versus reality principles, the id-ego-superego connection, the Oedipal complex, dreams and dream symbolism, and the various defense mechanisms. Often, a psychoanalytical reading will open up the text dramatically. We can now examine the theories of Jacques Lacan, who makes Freud even more applicable to literary interpretation.

21. Defense mechanism in which one denies one's feelings and believes (or claims) instead that someone *else* has these emotions.
22. Defense mechanism in which one expresses the opposite of what one really feels.
23. Defense mechanism in which one attempts to justify something—an event, one's emotions or behavior, and so on—to explain it away.
24. Driving force in humans that is concerned with desire, sexual desire, love, and so on.
25. The driving force of death; humans have a simultaneous fear and fascination with this unknown.

### YOUR PROCESS

1. What aspect(s) of Freud's theory most interests you?
2. How could you take that interest in Freud and apply it to a work of literature?
3. What can you envision as the benefits of such an application?
4. Are there any concerns you might have about your approach?

### 3.4 Focus on Jacques Lacan (1901–81): Repressed Desire and the Limits of Language

Jacques Lacan, in many ways, is more popular than Freud in literary analysis, though Freud is certainly more famous across disciplines. And the fact remains that Lacan is a Freudian—his theory is dependent on Freud. When Lacan writes that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” he moves Freud from the biological realm into the realm of language. Dor, Joël. *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language*. (New York: Other Press, 1998) pg. 244. Freudian literary criticism is primarily external to a work of art: we read and interpret according to Freud’s theories, applying, for example, the id-ego-superego triad to Hawthorne’s short story “The Birthmark,” as a student example demonstrates later in the chapter. Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism, on the other hand, can be seen as internal to the work, for it focuses on the actual language of the literary work. In other words, the text becomes alive, having its own mind, its own psyche. Lacanian psychoanalysis is textual, part of the artistic, formal construction of the literary work.

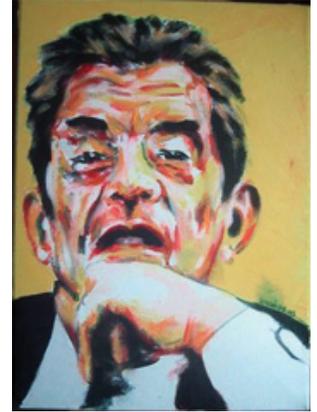


Image courtesy of Pablosecca, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lacan-by-pablo-secca.png>.

As you remember, Freud posits that the mind is divided between the conscious and unconscious, the dividing line between the two states representing the repression barrier. Lacan positions language in this dichotomy by modifying the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that words (or signs) work within a system of other signs (our language). However, Saussure believes a sign is only an arbitrary marker between the **signifier**<sup>26</sup> (the form the sign takes—a sound, a symbol, or a word) and its **signified**<sup>27</sup> (the concept the sign represents). Lacan, who felt that the signifier (the word) dominated the signified (the actual “thing” the word represents), represents the sign system as follows:

$$\text{Sign} = \frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$$

Thus to say a cat is a *cat* is to say the following:

26. The first part of the sign system that represents that sign or signifier, the actual word for the signifier, or an example.

27. The second part of the sign system; the tangible object or “real” concept that is represented by the signifier.

$$\text{Cat} = \frac{\text{C - A - T (the word itself)}}{\text{"essence" of cat (the "real" cat)}}$$

This “bonding” between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, argues Saussure, for we could have easily labeled the “essence of the cat” a *trilgy* and been hollering for years, “Here, trilgy...trilgy...trilgy.” But Saussure contends that once an arbitrary sign is constructed, it remains bonded together and unchangeable, like two sides to a piece of paper. Language, consequently, is a system of signs, where words take on their meaning only in relationship to other words. Lacan revises Saussure by suggesting that signs are *not* stable, but in fact are continually shifting; words are a mere approximation of meaning, thus Lacan’s emphasis on the word over the actual “thing” the word represents.

Lacan, then, views words, the signifiers, the marks of letters on a page, as central to the creation of meaning (or the essence of the signified). Words bring meaning to the object; the signified is meaningless without the signifier. Language, consequently, throws a person into a sign system that never captures meaning, the human thrust into the language of desire. Or to put it plainly, if you like cats, then having the word *cat* nicely printed in your lap is not as fulfilling as having that actual furry creature purring in your lap.

To a degree, the sign, split between the signifier and the signified, acts like a repression barrier: Freud’s unconscious becomes the Lacanian signified—meaning—which can never be fulfilled since language—the signifier—approximates meaning. If Lacan is correct (and, of course, this is a pretty big “if”), then our unconscious is “structured like a language,” and it follows that the human subject is divided between our name (for us, John Pennington and Ryan Cordell) and our signified (for us, the essence of “John Pennington” and “Ryan Cordell”). Lacan distinguishes the dual self by labeling the *moi*<sup>28</sup> (the image the person has of himself or herself) and the *je*<sup>29</sup> (the speaking subject that positions the person in language) as parts of the self:

$$\frac{\text{moi (image)}}{\text{je (speaking subject)}} = \text{(barrier)}$$

28. “Me,” which in Lacanian thought represents the image a person has of himself or herself.

29. “I,” which in Lacanian thought is the actual speaking subject, the person.

Another way of comprehending the *moi/je* dichotomy is to understand how a pronoun operates in a conversation. If you say to a friend—“I would love to go to a movie tonight, wouldn’t you?”—*I = You* and the *You = Your friend*. When your friend responds—“You have a good idea; I’d sure like to go”—the *I = Your Friend* and *You = You*. Lacan claims that language creates our identity and places us within the system of language, which, as we remember, is arbitrary and approximate. Language, as Lacan defines it, represents “the unconscious [that] is structured like a

language,” yet this language “is the discourse of the Other,” the Other being language. Dor, Joël. Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language. (New York: Other Press, 1998) pg. 244.

Central to Freud’s psychoanalytic theory is the Oedipal complex, and Lacan modifies the complex by making it a product of language acquisition. He argues that a child passes through the **Imaginary**<sup>30</sup> and the **Symbolic**<sup>31</sup> and strives to attain the **Real**<sup>32</sup>, roughly equivalent to the anal, oral, and phallic stages. The Imaginary stage is prelinguistic, similar to the id with its chaotic collection of desire. During the Imaginary stage, the child has no clearly defined sense of self; instead, it is a mass of fluid desire, Lacan’s image for this is an *omelet* or *egg*, a human Humpty Dumpty so-to-speak. In this amorphous Imaginary state, the child has no boundaries since it has no self. However, the child passes through the **Mirror stage**<sup>33</sup>, where it sees itself reflected in the mirror, and this reflection provides the child with an image of itself, one at first of ideal completeness. The child identifies with the reflection in the mirror. Yet this image of completeness is quickly shattered, for the child must misread itself, for it simultaneously sees itself as unified and as an object, an Other. Thus the beginning of the split subject. It is important to note that during the Mirror stage the child begins to acquire language, learning immediately that what is desired and the words used to identify that object of desire are not the same. Language in the Mirror stage fragments the myth of the unified self contained in the Imaginary stage.

30. The stage where the child believes in wholeness of identity; this is a prelinguistic stage.

31. The stage represented by language, law, and order—those socially accepted beliefs.

32. The sought-after stage that is unattainable since it eludes any attempt to name it in language—the concept of “death” is an example.

33. Stage where child passes from the Imaginary (believing in unity) to the Symbolic (which is a world of differences).

34. Found in the Imaginary and Mirror stages, where the mother is one with the child and satisfies all wants and desires.

35. “Little object ‘a.’” The desire to find such an object, which provides temporary meaning, yet shifts since the sign system is only an approximation of meaning.

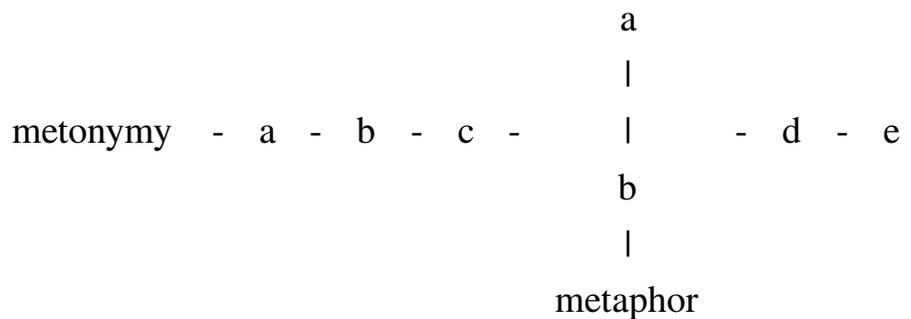
During the Imaginary and Mirror stages, the child is subject to the **desire-of-the-mother**<sup>34</sup>, whereby the child has complete desire for the mother and believes the mother in turn exists solely for the child’s pleasure. Again, a division occurs as the self misreads itself in terms of the image the self projects into the mirror (or interprets from the reflection). Mother is both self and other, as is the child’s identity. Enter the father—again. By this time, the child is cast into the Symbolic stage by being thrust into the language of differences. Since language is based on the signifier | signified, it follows that once a child is inserted into language it sees that its desire—the naming of objects—is never fulfilled by the object itself, for language is arbitrary and empty. Furthermore, the child is thrown into a world of differences, for words only take on meaning in relation to other words, primarily the differences between words: male/female; father/son; mother/daughter; *moi/je*.

Consequently, the child, now split from itself, seeks fulfillment in other objects, the **objet petit a**<sup>35</sup>, loosely translated as “little object ‘a.’” The *objet petit a* is a product of language, so it cannot really be found. Lacan contends that language operates as to preclude the child’s fulfillment of finding an *objet petit a*. The mirror reflection becomes an apt metaphor: you are the reflection in the mirror, yet that reflection only “reflects” you (it truly isn’t you). The distance between the mirror and where you are standing symbolizes the gap or gulf between words and a person’s identity.

That Alice is able to cross through the mirror into Looking-Glass Land, for example, represents her desire—she is in an imaginary realm (her mind?) where she can attempt to satiate her desire.

Lacan insists then language is a source of our desire but that language becomes the source of frustrated desire since words can never capture desire or the essence of meaning. Think about what happens when you stumble across a word you don't know: you look it up in a dictionary, only to find that the word is defined by other words, which have their own meanings, which you could look up in a dictionary, which...and we are in an endless, infinite loop. Take the word *liminal*. What does it mean? The *Merriam-Webster Online* dictionary defines *liminal* as a “sensory threshold,” as something “barely perceptible,” and as an “intermediate state, phase, or condition” that might exist between *life* and *death*. *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “liminal,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal>. Now do you know what the word really means? Or are you a bit frustrated? One thing we do know for sure is that Alice travels to liminal spaces when she tumbles to Wonderland and when she crosses over to Looking-Glass Land.

Let's place all this in a tighter format. Remember, Freud claims that the dreamwork uses displacement and condensation to create the manifest content of the dream. For Lacan the dreamwork is a manifestation of language—displacement resides in **metonymy**<sup>36</sup> and condensation in **metaphor**<sup>37</sup>:



36. Substitution of a name or word that is closely associated with the thing that is meant; for instance, “White House” used to indicate the executive branch of the government.

37. When one object is equated with another, thus substituting for that object: “my love is a red red rose” (metaphor), rather than “my love is *like* a red red rose” (simile).

Wondering what *metonymy* and *metaphor* are? In *A Handbook to Literature*, C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon provide excellent definitions of these literary devices. *Metonymy* is “the substitution of the name of an object closely associated with a word for the word itself. We commonly speak of the monarch as ‘the crown,’ an object closely associated with royalty thus being made to stand for it.” C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, eds., *A Handbook to Literature* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson, 2009). *Metaphor* is “an analogy identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.” C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, eds., *A Handbook to Literature* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson, 2009).

In effect, metonymy works by displacement, residing on a horizontal axis that reflects the displacement; thus, “a” is displaced by “b,” which is displaced by “c,” and so on. Metaphor, in turn, operates by substitution, and can be placed on a vertical axis where one thing stands in completely for another: “a” = “b.”

You can now see how Lacan’s theory begins to come together. Metonymy, being displacement, is a result of the Mirror stage where the child recognizes its reflection first as a complete substitution for itself (a metaphor), but it soon realizes that the reflection is of an Other, a displacement of the self (a metonym). Thus, since language is split between signifier | signified, it primarily operates as metonymy. Language as metonymy always leaves a gap or **absence or lack**<sup>38</sup>, since no complete meaning can be attained. Language, consequently, is like the unconscious, which strives to fulfill repressed desire. Another way of understanding language as a gap is to open a dictionary to find a meaning of a word, as we have discussed earlier. Cast into a language of desire, humans are unable to find stable meaning, for language cannot satisfy desire; we continually search for an *objet petit a* that will fulfill us, but that *objet* is based on a lack, for it is simply a product of language.

If Lacan subscribes to Freud’s Oedipal complex, then the father must become a significant player in the development drama of the individual. Lacan argues that the desire-of-the-mother, a product of the Imaginary stage, is replaced by the **name-of-the-father**<sup>39</sup>, the **phallus**<sup>40</sup>, which represents law and authority and brings some boundary to the self. The phallus or name-of-the-father is not the sexual organ itself, but a symbolic representation that is similar to the superego. The phallus is another *objet petit a*, but it operates as an anchoring point along the horizontal axis of metonymy. As the human subject floats through language on the metonymic plane, it searches for the phallus and temporarily finds the phallus as a metaphor on the vertical plane. Thus the phallus becomes the privileged signifier, for it helps the split subject achieve temporary meaning in the endless journey through the language of desire. However, the phallus can never be secured, for it too resides in language and quickly slips away. Thus the search for the phallus or name-of-the-father is a frustrated desire since it is a product of language.

38. That which is created by language since no word can capture the essence of the sign or thing named.

39. Represented by the phallus, this is the law and authority that constrains self and desire.

40. The privileged sign that represents the name-of-the-father.

Finally, Lacan constructs the ideal realm called the Real, the ultimate place where the Imaginary and Symbolic stages can meet. To Lacan, though, the Real is only symbolic and beyond the reach of language—it represents the unattainable; it represents desire. The Imaginary and Symbolic are like two sides of a sheet of paper, similar to the signifier and signified; the Real is like a Möbius strip constructed from strands of paper where the Imaginary and Symbolic become entangled and lost in the web between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Lacan's theory is complex and at times confusing, yet like Freud's it is intriguing. His revising of Freud's concepts "into" language makes his theory particularly applicable to literary interpretation, for literature is based on language, which is structured like the unconscious. Whereas Freud suggests the literary work is structured like an author's dream in need of interpretation, Lacan proposes that language itself is a dream of condensation and displacement; therefore, Lacan's theory is centered more in actual language and less in the peculiar workings of each individual author and reader. Literary interpretation based on language, then, attempts to find meaning in a work that will elude us because language slides away from us. Our desire for interpretation, in a sense, can only be temporarily reached via an anchoring point (a written paper), but that point will be undercut with subsequent papers and interpretations.



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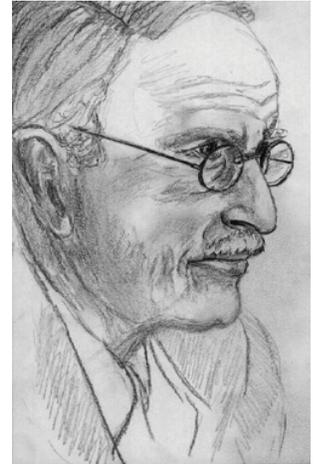
Furthermore, Lacan's Imaginary, prelinguistic stage is appealing to feminist critics, for the Imaginary seems a maternal stage of unity that does not rely on a girl's symbolic castration to enter into the realm of the Symbolic, for both male and female are immersed into language, which casts each into a world of differences. In Freud's theory, a girl is defined by lacking—she desires the male organ that she does not have. Lacan, however, situates all this in language, revealing that women are marginalized not biologically but linguistically, for the privileged signifier is the phallus, or patriarchy.

### YOUR PROCESS

1. What aspect of Lacan's theory most interests you?
2. How could you take that interest in Lacan and apply it to a work of literature?
3. What can you envision as the benefits of such an application?
4. Are there any concerns you might have about your approach?

### 3.5 Focus on Carl Jung (1875–1961): The Archetypal Collective Unconsciousness

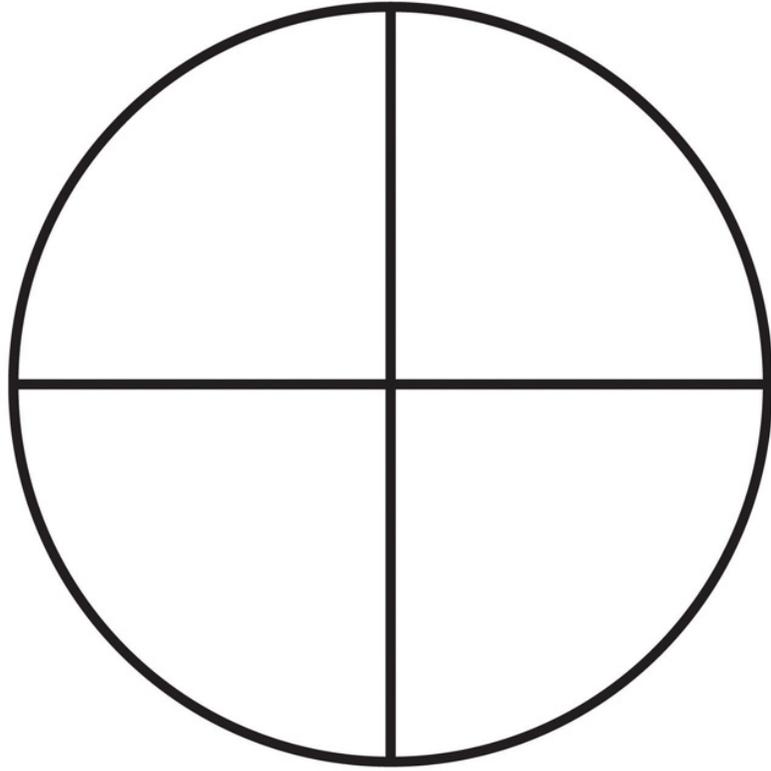
Carl Jung, like Lacan, was a disciple of Freud's, but unlike Lacan, Jung eventually split from Freud, believing that Freud focused too heavily on the importance of sexual desire and the repression that that desire causes. Jung felt that Freud's theories were, simply, too vague and could be manipulated to fit any scheme. Jung's complaint seems justified, for Freudian analysis can become reductive as a reader finds phallic symbolism in every knife and fork and yonic symbolism in the soup bowl. Freud's claim that the unconscious is a result of a person's repressed desire (which of course is sexual, libidinal), is challenged by Jung, who argues that the mind is constructed of multiple layers of consciousness, the unconscious composing only one of those layers. Jung's map of the mind is like a house with several stories: on one level lives the conscious, on another the personal unconscious (similar to Freud's unconscious), on another the **collective unconscious**<sup>41</sup>, which represents a universal storehouse of images that are common to all humanity. Jung clearly separates himself from Freud, for the collective unconscious is much larger than the unconscious, suggesting that a commonality is shared by all humans—including the importance of myth, ritual, and religion.



The collective unconscious can be accessed through various **archetypes**<sup>42</sup> that represent for a particular culture a variation of the collective unconscious. Archetypes are like universal Tupperware containers; a particular culture, society, or individual fills that container with its more “personal” symbol-mixture that is molded by the archetype container yet maintains its individual flavor. Thus an archetype is simultaneously universal and particular. Archetypes are those “big dreams” of a culture.

The overriding archetype for Jung is the **Self**<sup>43</sup>, the image of wholeness or individuation. Jung's graphic depiction of the Self is the **mandala**<sup>44</sup>, a circle containing four harmonious parts.

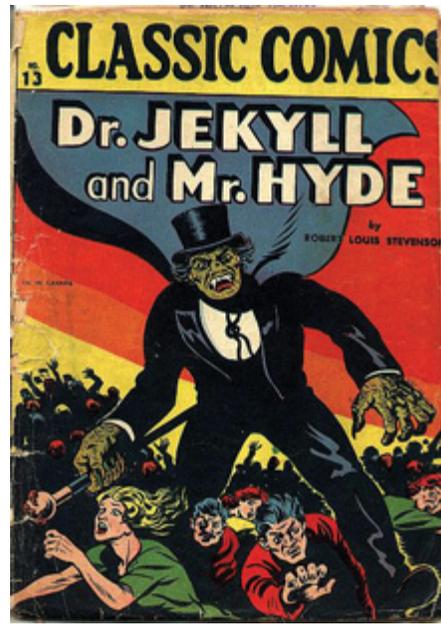
41. The universal storehouse of images common to all humanity.
42. Particular images or symbols that are part of the collective unconscious. The major archetypes include the Self, the shadow, the anima, and the animus.
43. Key archetype that represents the total personality but is unknown, leading to the quest or search for “self.”
44. ⊕; symbol for the unified Self—wholeness.



The mandala is beginning and end, perfectly balanced by the four chambers, which composes the unification of the whole Self. Jung’s concept of the collective Self, as you can see, is diametrically opposed to Freud’s and Lacan’s fractured and split individual self. According to Jung each person wears an outward face to the world, a **mask or persona**<sup>45</sup>, while the inward face contains the **shadow**<sup>46</sup> and the anima/animus. The shadow is the dark side of the Self that we all hope to hide; it is also the “moral problem” that the Self must grapple with on its way to wholeness. The Self must eventually recognize its shadow as part of its nature. The *doppelgänger* is the German literary term for the double, and it captures the dark side of the human. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is a prototypical story of the double; it focuses on the experiences of the mannered Dr. Henry Jekyll and his alter ego, the beastly Mr. Hyde. Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886; Project Gutenberg, 2011), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/42/pg42.html>. Stevenson’s novel famously suggests that the shadow resides naturally in the Self, though the Self wears a mask to hide that shadow side to the world and to the Self.

45. The outward face that a person wears into the world that hides the true self.

46. Key archetype that challenges the concept of self; the shadow is the dark side of the Self, or the moral problem that the Self must confront.



Classics Illustrated cover for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1943).

Furthermore, every Self has its own masculine or feminine counterpart to the personality: the **anima**<sup>47</sup> is the female part of the male; the **animus**<sup>48</sup> is the masculine part of the female. The anima embodies Eros—desire—a maternal archetype that is both positive (the nurturing mother) and negative (the devouring witch). Anima archetypes include the Great Mother, the Tempting Whore, and the Destroying Crone. Conversely, the animus embodies Logos—reason—and is paternal, symbolized by the Great Father, the Wise Old Man, the Lover, and the Destroying Angel archetypes. Both anima and animus have positive and negative dimensions. As the shadow side of the Self is usually hidden or repressed inside, the anima or animus side of the Self is also internalized and hidden, for the Self is unwilling to recognize its feminine or masculine side. That is why the Self will project its opposite onto others, which explains erotic heterosexual love: the male and female are united, finding their anima or animus completed by their partner. Jung falls into the same trap as Freud to a degree—they both make essentialist assumptions about gender.

47. Archetype for the man. The anima represents the maternal, Eros, and desire.

48. Archetype for the woman. The animus represents the paternal, Logos, and reason.

49. The state of unity when the quest for the whole Self is achieved.

50. An archetypal story that mirrors the quest for the complete Self. Myths are part of the collective unconsciousness.

Since the goal of the Self is harmony, as seen in the mandala, the Self undertakes the archetypal quest to achieve **syzygy**<sup>49</sup>, the fulfillment of unity, of balance. Jung fathoms that the **myths**<sup>50</sup> of a culture highlight the Self's quest for completeness, symbolized by the mandala, and the quaternion Christ is the ideal unified Self, containing Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and Mary (thus balancing the anima and animus). Unlike Freud, who saw no value in religion, Jung's theory is cemented in religion, with the Self a reflection of God. The quest to find the Self, consequently, is

a quest for God within the Self, symbolized by Christ, the purest archetype of the God-in-the-human-self. The quest for the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend, for example, symbolizes search for the unity of Self and God. Such a quest becomes the foundation for a culture's archetype, this archetype being a variation of the "big dream" of the collective unconscious, the grand archetype.

But how can you apply Jung to literary criticism? In "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" (1922), Jung explains how literature and the writer operate under the archetype. Carl Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," in *Twentieth Century Theories of Art*, ed. James M. Thompson (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1999), 151–67. Literature is not necessarily based on the personal unconscious of the writer, but on the unconscious mythology that is part of the collective unconsciousness. A writer, then, draws from the collective unconscious for the archetype. Literature is a powerful tool that operates like myth, ritual, and religion.

Other critics have adapted Jungian ideas. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), an anthropological compendium of cross-cultural myths, complements Jung's theories of myth. Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1922; Project Gutenberg, 2003), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3623>. Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) positions Jung in his definition of the monomyth—the departure, initiation, and return of the hero who finds completeness and wholeness during the quest. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008). George Lucas, for example, wrote the original *Star Wars Trilogy* as a modern myth that exemplifies Campbell's archetypal patterns. Darth Vader, the dark side of the Self, must be confronted, while the need for balance and control and harmony is found in Ben Kenobi's "force," which Luke Skywalker must master in order to confront his dark side, his Self, his father. *Star Wars Trilogy: Episode IV, A New Hope; Episode V, The Empire Strikes Back; and Episode VI, Return of the Jedi*, directed by George Lucas (1980; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2004), DVD. The most recent example of this myth is seen in Harry Potter's confrontation with Voldemort.

Jungian criticism is often applied to literature that is considered more mythic—fairy tales, fantasy, and medieval romances. In *Fairy Tales: Allegories of Inner Life* (1983), J. C. Cooper argues that "Jack and the Beanstalk" depicts common archetypes of the Fool and Trickster, as Jack moves from the fool (for buying "magic" beans) to the trickster (who can outwit the giant). J. C. Cooper, *Fairy Tales: Allegories of Inner Life* (London: Aquarian, 1983). To Cooper, the fairy tale is about the universal pattern where goodness triumphs over evil, where ingenuity and innocence defeat brutality. Cooper's reading is far different than Bettelheim's.

While Jungian criticism is often applied to texts that privilege fantasy over realistic narrative, the theory can find uses in all forms of contemporary literature, as seen in John Neary's recent *Shadows and Illuminations: Literature as Spiritual Journey* (2011), in which he examines the work of writers as diverse as Jonathan Safran Foer, Yann Martel, Toni Morrison, to Jane Hamilton. John Neary, *Shadows and Illuminations: Literature as Spiritual Journey* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

### YOUR PROCESS

1. What aspect of Jung's theory most interests you?
2. How could you take that interest in Jung and apply it to a work of literature?
3. What can you envision as the benefits of such an application?
4. Are there any concerns you might have about your approach?

### 3.6 Reading Keats's "Urn" through the Psychoanalytic Lens

THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  
And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
For ever piping songs for ever new;  
More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
For ever panting, and for ever young;  
All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
What little town by river or sea-shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul, to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.  
O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

### CLASS PROCESS

1. Have your class read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919; Bartleby.com, 1999), <http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html>.
2. Break up into at least three groups.
3. Assign each group one critic: Freud, Lacan, or Jung.
4. Have them discuss ways to apply their theory to the poem.
5. Have them develop a claim about the poem that uses the theory.
6. Bring the class back together and have groups present their theories.
7. Engage in a larger group discussion about psychoanalytic literary criticism.
8. Now look at the following overview and compare with your class discussion.

Keats's "Urn," as you have discovered, lends itself well to the psychoanalytic perspective. Compare the classroom discussion with some critical applications of psychoanalytic theory to Keats's poem. Leon Waldoff in *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (1985), for example, demonstrates how Keats's loss of family members creates "feelings of separation anxiety," especially the loss of his mother and brother Tom. Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). This loss becomes manifest in "an unconscious determinant" that creates key symbols in Keats's odes, the Grecian urn being an example. Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). The urn symbolizes, argues Waldoff, an "undying longing for permanence" that symbolizes an "unending quest conducted at the deepest levels of the mind by the silent work of the imagination, which repeatedly seeks to heal an insistent sense of loss and to deal with its more conscious complement—a penetrating awareness of the transience of human life and a concern with philosophical questions raised by that awareness." Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). The urn, like the other artifacts in Keats's odes (nightingale, autumn, melancholy), shows "the fundamental impossibility of controlling imagination and the desire impelling it toward a finer conception of its object." Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Waldoff contends Keats's melancholia that results from familial loss "provides a structure or context within which the unconscious processes evident in the poetry may be seen to work with cohesion and unity of purpose in the direction they give to the imagination." Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign:

University of Illinois Press, 1985). Keats's life, then, is the key subtext that is the foundation of the odes.

A Lacanian reading could extend Waldoff's argument: the poet, unable to regain the lost past, attempts through poetry to fulfill this desire for his mother and brothers. The urn is an object of desire—*objet petit a*—that acts as a temporary anchoring point for the poet. However, since the poem generates meaning through language, and since language cannot fulfill desire, the urn image ultimately fails to fulfill; it is a "Cold Pastoral." Keats's repetition of the word *happy* in stanza three—"More happy love! more happy, happy love"; "Ah, happy, happy boughs"; "And happy melodist"—reflects the emptiness of language that tries to capture true desire. *Happy* can only approximate "happiness," the signified that the poet wishes to convey. In a sense, Keats's poem attempts to reach the Real to satiate the longing to move from the Symbolic realm that continually frustrates fulfillment.

Finally, in *The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Odes* (1964), Katharine M. Wilson provides a Jungian interpretation of the odes. She argues that Keats's odes are attempts to tap into the archetypal collective unconsciousness, for poetry works by "images...which come from the deeper layers of the poet's psyche, rather than from his superficial observation, or from his personal unconscious." Katharine M. Wilson, *The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Odes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964). The odes are Keats's "quest for the Self." In "Urn," in particular, "beauty for Keats was entangled with intimation of the Self"; thus beauty's "permanence lies in the realm of the psyche." "The urn is like a frozen archetype," argues Wilson. "It is a permanent object passed from generation to generation of sorrowing humanity, but has fixed on its objects of beauty." Katharine M. Wilson, *The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Odes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964). The urn, consequently, as frozen archetype epitomizes truth and beauty that resides in the Self, that Self tapping the larger collective unconscious for its images.

### 3.7 Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: A Process Approach

When you write a critical paper using a psychoanalytic approach, you need to determine the focus you will use. Will you focus on the author? On the characters or the narrator? On the formal construction of the text? Often, a reading will draw from all three levels (as does Waldoff's interpretation of Keats). Since psychoanalyzing an author requires considerable biographical research, many students opt to focus on character, theme, or text. You should also be guided by the following:

1. You must clearly define your psychoanalytic approach to the work—Freudian, Lacanian, Jungian, or some combination. You could explore ideas in a journal entry to help you focus on your critical approach. You should then construct a working thesis that will be your guide. Ask yourself the following: How does my psychoanalytic approach help my reader better understand the work I am interpreting? Is my application of psychoanalytic theory too reductive or forced onto the literary work?
2. You then need to reread the text through the psychoanalytic lens, taking notes and jotting down quotations that can be used for support in your paper. At this stage you should be amassing evidence to support your working thesis.
3. You should then construct a more concrete working thesis and informal organizational plan that will guide you as you write your draft. Remember, your paper must be organized around a clear focus/thesis.
4. You should finally get some feedback on your paper by sharing your draft with your instructor and classmates. Use this feedback for revision.

#### Peer Reviewing

After you have written a first draft, you should get some feedback from classmates. Use the relevant peer-review guide found in [Chapter 10 "Appendix A: Peer Review Sheets"](#).

### 3.8 Student Writers at Work: Jenn Nemeč's Jungian Psychoanalytic Reading of "The Birthmark," Susan Moore's Freudian Reading of "The Birthmark," and Sarah David's Lacanian Reading of "The Birthmark"

Literary theory provides a lens through which we view a literary work, be it in a New Critical close reading of a short story, a feminist or gender reading of a poem, or a reader-response interpretation of a dramatic play. In fact, the theory we apply to a literary work will partly determine what we find in the work and how we interpret that work. For this chapter, you will see how theory guides your interpretation. The three papers below, which came from the same class, focus on Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (serialized in a magazine in 1843; published in a story collection in 1846). Jenn found Jungian theory fascinating, Susan was intrigued by Freud, while Sarah was challenged by Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of language.

You can access "The Birthmark" at [http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=HawBirt.sgm &images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=HawBirt.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1).

In this section we trace Jenn's writing process.

## JENN'S PROCESS

### Exploratory Journal Entry

Aylmer, the central character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," attempts to attain what Carl Jung calls syzygy, or wholeness of personality. To achieve syzygy, one must integrate the four parts of the individual self termed shadow, anima, animus, and spirit, respectively. Despite his efforts, the gifted Aylmer fails to achieve this quaternion, for not only does he err in identifying his shadow, but he lacks the necessary wisdom of the spirit.

Aylmer misjudges his shadow, or the moral problem challenging his whole ego-personality. Although it is Aminadab, Aylmer's faithful servant, who represents all the aspects of Aylmer's personality which he would like to reject, Aylmer identifies Georgiana's birthmark as the source of the evil he wants to deny and devotes all of his efforts to its elimination. Aylmer projects all his negative feelings upon his wife and recognizes her birthmark as the origin of imperfection rather than himself. The existence of the birthmark possesses Aylmer, who in turn becomes obsessed with it and its disposal.

The manifestations of both Georgiana's animus and Aylmer's anima are factors which contribute to the unattainability of syzygy. Georgiana's dependence upon Aylmer as her source of logos allows her husband to administer whatever treatment he deems necessary to rid the couple's life of the wretched birthmark. Additionally, Georgiana's quest for logos draws her to the book in which Aylmer has documented all of his failed experiments. Through Georgiana's discovery of Aylmer's scientific blunders, readers learn that the removal of Georgiana's birthmark is Aylmer's ultimate opportunity to "touch reality, to embrace the earth and fructify the field of the world" (Jung 671), thereby satisfying his anima's desire to possess the chaste White Lady side of Georgiana. Unfortunately, the encounter between Georgiana's animus and Aylmer's anima proves fatal—the woman's reliance upon her husband's ill-reasoning as he pursues his desire demonstrates that "when animus and anima meet, the animus [Aylmer] draws his sword of power and the anima [Georgiana] ejects her poison of illusion and seduction [the birthmark as blemish]" (Jung 673).

Even if the ambitious Aylmer had successfully perceived Aminadab to be his shadow rather than Georgiana's birthmark, the scientist still would have faltered in his steps toward achieving syzygy, for he lacked the necessary component of spirit, or what Jung called the Wise Old Man or Woman.

Although Aylmer is described as spiritual in opposition to the earthly Aminadab, “The Birthmark” concludes that despite Aylmer’s philosophical intelligence, he was by no means wise (“Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life the selfsame texture with the celestial”).

### Working Thesis (Gleaned from the Exploratory Journal Entry)

Despite his efforts, the gifted Aylmer fails to achieve the balance of the self, for not only does he err in identifying his shadow, but he lacks the necessary wisdom of the *spirit*.

Notes: Mapping of Ideas

Shadow	Anima
birthmark	Eros/desire
possesses Aylmer, who	Aylmer: Georgiana
is obsessed by it	Science
Aminadab: shadow	Georgiana: feminine side of Aylmer

Animus	Self/Spirit
logos, reason	Aylmer (ego) + Aminadab science, scientist (shadow) + Georgiana (anima)
Georgiana as object of experiment—Aylmer’s	Aylmer ≠ shadow + anima
	Rejects shadow in name of anima
	Science projects feeling of imperfection onto G
	(birthmark)

Aylmer: In pursuit of syzygy\quaternion symbolizing wholeness fails because he misjudges his shadow and deludes himself into thinking science (reason) is pure and good for its own end—rejects wife (part of himself) for science while rejecting part of himself (his shadow). End must be tragedy.

Revised Thesis

Since Aylmer gravely blunders in identifying his shadow and is incapable of recognizing his dark side and integrating it with the other three

archetypes—the anima, animus, and spirit—the scientist fails in his unconscious efforts to achieve syzygy, a complete Self in balance with itself. Thus Aylmer allows science to control his desire for perfection, which leads to tragedy—the death of Georgiana.

## Final Draft

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Literary Theory and Writing

February 26, 20–

“Beyond the Shadowy Scope”: A Jungian Reading of Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark”

In “Young Goodman Brown,” Nathaniel Hawthorne describes Goodman Brown’s night journey of the soul, where Brown sees that all humans are tainted by original sin, even his wife Faith. The story ends with Brown’s death: “They carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom.” Hawthorne suggests that Brown’s inability to recognize the sinful nature of humankind leads to his miserable life, for humans must recognize the sinful side of the self. Carl Gustav Jung remarked that “it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognize the relative evil of his nature, but it is a rare and shattering occurrence for him to gaze in the face of absolute evil” (670). Aylmer, the central character in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark,” refuses to acknowledge the dark side of the self, symbolized in his servant, Aminadab, his *shadow*, or the “demonic image of evil that represents the side of the self we reject” (Richter 644). Instead, Aylmer projects his negative feelings onto his wife, Georgiana, and the hand-shaped birthmark upon her cheek. Since Aylmer gravely blunders in identifying his *shadow* and is incapable of integrating this phenomenon with the other three principle archetypes—the *anima*, *animus*, and *spirit*—the scientist fails in his unconscious efforts to achieve *syzygy*, “a quaternion symbolizing wholeness, the quality of which people are usually in search” (Richter 644). “The Birthmark,” like “Young Goodman Brown,” shows the tragedy that can happen when people are unwilling to recognize sinful (or the dark) side of the self, for, as Hawthorne writes, Aylmer “failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present” (224).

Jung argues that the *shadow* is “the ‘negative’ side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide” (Storr 87). Thus Aylmer rejects the notion that he has a shadow, this shadow symbolized by his laboratory servant Aminadab. If Aylmer recognizes Aminadab as part of his self, then he must recognize “the dark aspects of the personality as present and real” (Jung 669); therefore, Aminadab’s existence poses “a moral problem that challenges [Aylmer’s] whole ego-personality” (Jung 669). Although Aylmer wishes to believe the two men are very different, “The Birthmark” offers evidence that the amalgam of the two creates an eerie whole: “With his [Aminadab’s] vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that encrusted him, he seemed to represent man’s physical nature; while Aylmer’s slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element” (Hawthorne 216). The text likewise offers proof that unconsciously, Aylmer recognizes Aminadab as the part of himself he chooses to deny. The scientist exclaims after the “success” of his ultimate experiment, “Ah, clod! ah, earthly mass! ... you have served me well! Matter and spirit—earth and heaven—have both done their part in this!” (223). Aylmer subconsciously acknowledges that the two men are halves of his whole self—Aminadab comprises the earthly portion while Aylmer embodies the heavenly part.

Despite the unconscious recognition of Aminadab as his *shadow*, Aylmer projects his fears of the shadow onto Georgiana, insisting that her birthmark is to blame for his feelings of discord: “Selecting it as the symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer’s somber imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana’s beauty ... had given him delight” (Hawthorne 213). Aylmer becomes possessed with the birthmark and likewise obsessed with its disposal. Because Aylmer cannot come to terms with his failures as a man of science, he projects his negative feelings onto Georgiana and her birthmark; consequently, the blemish becomes a symbol for Aylmer’s own imperfections. The fault “appears to lie, beyond all possibility of doubt, in the other person [that is, Georgiana]” (Jung 670), and Aylmer’s “projections change the world into the replica of [his] unknown face” (Jung 669). By striving to eliminate Georgiana’s birthmark, Aylmer endeavors to “cleanse” himself of his own imperfections.

Aylmer’s inability to correctly perceive his *shadow* leads to his difficulties with integrating the contents of Georgiana’s *animus*, “the masculine side to the female self” (Richter 644), with his *anima*, “the feminine side of the male self”

(Richter 644); these factors further inhibit him from achieving the quaternion of *syzygy*. According to Jung, “The *animus* corresponds to the paternal *Logos* [reason, logic] just as the *anima* corresponds to the maternal *Eros* [love, desire]” (672). Following this theory, Georgiana’s dependence upon Aylmer as her source of *logos* allows her husband to administer whatever treatment he deems necessary to rid the couple’s life of the wretched birthmark. Additionally, Georgiana’s quest for *logos* draws her to the book in which Aylmer has documented all of his failed experiments: “Much as he had accomplished, she could not but observe that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures.... It [the folio] was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man... and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part” (220). Through Georgiana’s discovery of Aylmer’s scientific blunders, readers learn that the removal of Georgiana’s birthmark is Aylmer’s ultimate opportunity to fulfill his “desire to touch reality, to embrace the earth and fructify the field of the world” and break his cycle of “no more than a series of fitful starts” (Jung 671), the culmination of his life’s work. In Aylmer’s glorious attempt to rid Georgiana of her imperfection, he tries to satisfy his *anima*’s desire to possess the chaste “White Lady” *imago*. Unfortunately, the encounter between Georgiana’s *animus* and Aylmer’s *anima* proves fatal—the woman’s reliance upon her husband’s ill reasoning as he pursues his desire demonstrates that “when animus and anima meet, the animus [Aylmer] draws his sword of power and the anima [Georgiana] ejects her poison of illusion and seduction [the birthmark as blemish]” (Jung 673). Aylmer is left alone with his *shadow*, Aminadab, whose “hoarse, chuckling laugh [is] heard again” (Hawthorne 224) at Georgiana’s death as the chilling tale of “The Birthmark” concludes.

Had Aylmer recognized Aminadab as his *shadow* rather than projected his disgust onto Georgiana and her birthmark, and had he successfully integrated the contents of both his wife’s *animus* and his *anima*, the scientist still would have faltered in his steps toward achieving *syzygy*: for he lacked the necessary component of *spirit*, what Jung believed the presence of a wise old man or woman symbolized (Richter 644). Although Aylmer was a scientist of great philosophical intelligence and enormous potential, “The Birthmark” concludes that he was by no means wise. The closing lines of Hawthorne’s story read, “Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life the selfsame texture with the celestial” (224). Aylmer’s misguided projections onto Georgiana led him to “an autoerotic or autistic condition in which one dreams a world whose reality remains forever unattainable” (Jung 670). Each part of Aylmer—the scientist, the husband, the lover—lost its sustenance in the death

of Georgiana, for Aylmer “failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present” (Hawthorne 224).

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” spins a psychological web in which central character Aylmer becomes entangled. Riddled by obsession with his wife’s birthmark, a man of superb intelligence fails to recognize his dastardly *shadow*, which his ominous servant, Aminadab, embodies. The encounter between Georgiana’s *animus* and Aylmer’s *anima* proves disastrous, for when the contents of the two cannot be integrated, death and destruction arises. In addition to these failures, Aylmer lacks the vitally important *spirit*; consequently, he cannot achieve the quaternion of *syzygy* which he unconsciously seeks. Jung remarked, “It is often tragic to see how blatantly a man bungles his own life and the lives of others yet remains totally incapable of seeing how much the whole tragedy originates in himself” (670). Aylmer’s demise is a testament to Jung’s observation, for Hawthorne’s character is but a pathetic example of how the intricacies of personal evil can blind the most enlightened man of science and leave him muttering in the dark corners of his soul.

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### **3.9 Student Sample Paper: Susan Moore’s “The Desire for Perfection in Hawthorne’s ‘The Birthmark’”**

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The Desire for Perfection in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark"

"Beauty is only skin deep," or so people say. If so, then the presence of a birthmark should not affect how its owner is viewed, for nothing the person did warranted the mark: he or she just happened to be born with this natural blemish, symbolic of human's original sin. However, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale "The Birthmark," a small mark on a woman's face becomes the obsession of her husband, who insists upon removing it with his scientific expertise. Because of his passionate pleas, the woman gives in to his demands, thus dying. A psychoanalytic interpretation of the plot adds a new dimension to the literal level of the story. Freud's division of the mind into three elements (the id, ego, and superego) plays an enormous role in a psychoanalytic interpretation of "The Birthmark." The id contains all human passions and desires that lead to pleasure, conforming to Freud's "pleasure principle." The superego, the id's opposite, follows the "reality principle," for it is the moral conscience of the individual that is created by parents' rule and society's laws. The ego is a mediator between the two, as it directs the pleasure principle to the reality principle, telling the person how to act properly.

What happens when the ego fails to do its job? "The Birthmark" is a sobering example. When the scientist Aylmer lets his desire for perfection loose upon his wife (under the guise of his superego, science), he kills Georgiana (thus killing the symbolic id of himself). The ego, represented by his servant Aminadab, fails to be the mediator necessary for balance. Hawthorne suggests that a competent ego is necessary to prevent the devastating consequences of Aylmer's behavior. Without the ego's balancing effects, either the id or the superego will take control of a person, shutting out the other half with horrible results.

In this dark tale, science acts as a pseudo-superego. Science strives to find through rigorous experimentation the answers to all of nature's mysteries. Science represents the rational and permissible, and the scientist, hoping to help perfect life, is permitted to experiment to help benefit humanity. Science is exact—the scientist continues to strive for that exact, perfect answer that will satisfy him or her. Aylmer lives and breathes science: "He had devoted himself ... too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion" (Hawthorne 212). Aylmer is therefore an agent of the superego science, giving himself over to the search for perfection. Through this rational mode of thinking Aylmer strives for the flawlessness the superego symbolizes. He says to his wife, Georgiana, that she has led him even farther into science than his previous experiments. To

this he adds: “I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work” (215).

What is it about this flaw that so repulses the superego side of Aylmer? The birthmark, as little as it is, could represent the “evil” or impulsive id-like side of a person. It is red and hand-shaped, similar to the mark that would remain if someone slapped another on the face. Maybe the presence of this mark calls forth the same sort of reprimand by the superego that slapping someone would; the evil in that person is pointed out. However, the blemish appears on the face of an otherwise beautiful woman, so perhaps Hawthorne’s symbolic meaning is that such a small blemish should not really matter, for we are all “blemished” in a small way. Furthermore, the mark is natural, and so it should not be condemned. If the blemish represents imperfection, then science as superego has permission to eliminate the blemish in the name of science. If the blemish, however, represents the impulses of the id, science as superego will be naturally opposed to it, trying to “kill” it, even though the ego needs the balance of the id and superego.

The fact that the mark is so tiny shows just how obsessed the superego can become with perfection. Aylmer feels driven to remove even this small reminder of the human his wife is: “But seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with every moment of their united lives” (213). As his wife is a part of him through the symbolic union of marriage, he sees the mark as a reflection of himself—imperfect. Consequently, he wants to repress or hide in his unconscious the reminder that his wife is not perfect, for if he cannot make her perfect, he would have to admit his own humanity and ultimate failure as a scientist. Thus he is tempted by his superego to achieve perfection: “No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the mark of earthly imperfection” (212).

Despite her overwhelming beauty, Aylmer feels an almost neurotic need to remove the mark from Georgiana’s face and, ironically, this need seems simultaneously a function of the id. Georgiana’s beauty, then, can be seen as desire, for Aylmer wants her as wife (a perfect desirous object) and as specimen (the perfect scientific object). The pressure his wife feels from his id-superego-induced shame is enormous. Bowing to his overwhelming desires, she allows Aylmer free rein to perform any experiment he wishes, as long as the hateful mark is erased. She falls so under his influence that she no longer has any regard for her physical safety: “Danger? There is but one danger—that this horrible stigma shall be left upon my cheek!... Remove it, remove it, whatever be the cost or we shall both go mad!” (221). Georgiana as the id, beautiful to the narrator but flawed to Aylmer, gives way to the demands of the superego. Tragedy results.

This tragedy results because the ego does not balance the id-superego of Georgiana and Aylmer, a responsibility of the servant, Aminadab, the story’s ego. Hawthorne describes Aminadab in earthy terms: “With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that encrusted him, he seemed to represent man’s physical nature” (216). Aminadab seems a perfect mediator between the abstract scientific

superego and the uncontrolled passions of the id. His appearance is founded on the earth, as should be his actions. However, his status as Aylmer's servant indicates trouble. Hawthorne instantly defines the relationship between the two as one of master-servant (i.e., the superego as master, the ego as servant). Aminadab as ego should perform his duties, but he should balance the id with the superego. Yet he follows only Aylmer's monomaniacal drive for Georgiana's perfection: "[He] was admirably fitted for that office by his great mechanical readiness, and the skill with which, while incapable of comprehending a single principle, he executed all the details of his master's experiments" (216).

At one point Aminadab does try to assert himself, but his actions are too little too late. Hearing of his master's plan, Aminadab should object. Unfortunately he waits until ordered to "Throw open the door of the boudoir" (216). The door opening is symbolic of throwing open the door into the domain of the id (Georgiana), a place the superego should never directly see. The bedroom as symbol for the id's desire is reinforced by the dream-like, beautiful description of the room as containing gorgeous curtains draped around the room to give it a heavenly effect: "For aught Georgiana knew, it might be a pavilion among the clouds" (216). This contrasts sharply with Aylmer's domain of the scientific lab in which "the atmosphere felt oppressively close, and was tainted with gaseous odors which had been tormented forth by the processes of science" (220). The id and superego are represented by these separate rooms. However, Aminadab acquiesces to Aylmer's request to open the door, offering only a mumbled, "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark" (216). While his last statement may reflect the ego-like voice (a woman's life should not be put at risk for a small birthmark), the statement is spoken too softly to be heard by Aylmer, symbolic of Aylmer's demented drive for scientific perfection. If the remark had been made earlier and more forcefully—as symbolic of the ego's balance of the id and superego—the ensuing tragedy might have been avoided. Aminadab could have been the voice of reason, informing Aylmer that no matter the spiritual or physical depth of Georgiana's birthmark, it did not detract from her beauty.

Ironically, Aylmer destroys what is truly beautiful just because there is no force telling him he is acting inappropriately. As his wife was part of him and a reflection of him through marriage, the loss of her is the same as losing an essential piece of himself. Georgiana is now perfect, and the scientific quest is completed but unsuccessful, "yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial" (224). If Aylmer had realized that acceptance of the "fault" (of the birthmark, of the id) would be possible in this world, he could have been happy. Like the scientist Rappaccini, who poisons his daughter to make her beautiful, Aylmer commits the Hawthornian unpardonable sin: he allows his zealous desire for scientific perfect to overtake his humanity. From a Freudian perspective, Aylmer, operating with faulty ego, is unwilling to acknowledge his id (Georgiana, her beauty, and her blemish) by destroying it by his superego.

The part Aylmer lost in Georgiana should have been united with him in spirit if the symbolic ego, Aminadab, had performed properly. Perhaps Aminadab's inaction is intentional as an attempt to teach Aylmer his tragic lesson. When Aylmer thinks that his last scientific treatment is working to remove the birthmark, he hears Aminadab laughing: "Ah, clod! ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy, "you have served me well!

Matter and spirit—earth and heaven—have both done their part in this!” (223). Aylmer thinks the chuckle is a result of the servant’s happiness for his master’s success. Aminadab’s last laugh when Georgiana dies indicates differently. It comes right after Aylmer knows his wife is dead: “The parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering for a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again!” (224). Aminadab seems to laugh at Aylmer’s expense, and at his loss. The scientist discovers what life that strives solely for perfection, or is controlled solely by the superego, will be like. Hawthorne in “The Birthmark” creates a cautionary tale about the limits of reason and passion.

As the story suggests, a life lived with only superego-like tendencies will lead to tragedy. One part cannot exist without its opposite, and both need to be accepted and mediated by the ego to realize the full potential of life. A balance needs to be struck between the drive for perfection and the drive to satisfy more “base” desires. If one element gains control, then it will destroy the other, thus destroying part of the person. A rational (superego-like) world would be dull and dangerous and an irrational (id-like) world would be chaotic and equally dangerous. Why kill a part that could complement and balance the other? Hawthorne’s answer seems that many people are unable to recognize the need for such a balance.

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### **3.10 Student Sample Paper: Sarah David's "A Lacanian Analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark'"**

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Literary Theory and Writing

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A Lacanian Analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark"

The focal point of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" is a mysterious mark: "In the center of Georgiana's cheek there was a singular mark.... Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pygmy size. Georgiana's lovers were wont to say that some fairy at her birth had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek ... to give her such sway over all hearts" (Hawthorne 170). However, Aylmer sees the birthmark very differently from other men, "selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death" (170). This discrepancy confuses the reader and causes him or her to examine the true meaning of the birthmark. As the reader examines Aylmer's struggle to define the birthmark, his quest to rid Georgiana of her birthmark takes on new meaning.

Aylmer's quest to create perfect aesthetic beauty in his wife's appearance is analogous to Jacques Lacan's idea of searching for unity through language. Jacques Lacan is a student of Freud; however, he examines psychoanalysis through its relationship with language. Essentially he takes Freud's beliefs and applies them to language. While he agrees people are driven by their desires, he thinks problems stem from our inability to create a stable language. Lacan believes that everyone starts off in a pre-linguistic unified state because one cannot separate the self from others. This unified state only lasts until the child learns that he or she is separate from others, thus entering Lacan's Symbolic stage. After realizing he or she is a separate entity, the person then tries to identify images using language. However, since a signifier, a word, triggers the signified, an image or context represents language, and according to Lacan since there is no stability for signifiers, confusion occurs over the signifier representing one specific image. This confusion causes the person to feel a sense of loss. He or she then wishes for that wholeness or unity he or she had before and longs for the pre-linguistic state. This search for wholeness or the Real stage is ultimately unattainable. Reading "The Birthmark" from a Lacanian point of view, the reader can see that Aylmer's confusion over the signifier of the birthmark and his desire for unity, both of the signifier and the separateness of his loves, lead him to try to create perfect beauty in his wife as a way to regain his lost unity.

Language is a signifier that triggers the signified, but Lacan only acknowledges the signifier. He believes that "there is nothing that a signifier ultimately refers to" and "because of this lack of signifieds ... the chain of signifiers ... is constantly sliding and shifting and circulating" (Klages 2). Georgiana's birthmark becomes the

signifier in Aylmer's search for unity. To Aylmer the birthmark is "the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death"; however, some of Georgiana's former "lovers were wont to say (the birthmark gave) her such sway over all hearts," thus seeing the birthmark in a positive light (Hawthorne 170). Aylmer's apprentice, Aminadab, even tells him, "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark" (175). Because the birthmark, the signifier, does not result in one specific meaning, it causes confusion for Aylmer.

Since Aylmer realizes that signifiers do not always signify one meaning, he begins to feel fragmented. He also feels fragmented by the separateness of his love for science and his love for Georgiana. Hawthorne writes: "It was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of a woman" (169). This sense of separation occurs in Lacan's Symbolic stage. Language occurs in this stage because as the person is able to differentiate between the self and others he or she struggles to define the differences with words. Aylmer was already able to differentiate between what the birthmark meant to him and what it meant to others and since the meaning is not the same he feels a sense of separation over this lack of unity. His "awareness of separation ... creates an anxiety, a sense of loss" (Klages 3). This feeling of separation of his two loves adds to the feeling of loss over the lack of a stable signifier for his wife's birthmark. He then wants, as Lacan would say, "to stabilize, to stop the chain of signifiers so that stable meaning ... becomes possible" (Klages 2). Aylmer begins his search for unity, which can only be found in the Real stage, but realizes it can only be reached by "intertwining itself [the love for his wife] with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own" (Hawthorne 169).

As previously mentioned, the Symbolic stage is where language happens and a person begins to separate the self from others as well as beginning to differentiate language. This sense of loss creates a longing to return to the wholeness of the pre-linguistic stage. A person would then be in search to find this unity in the Real stage, and although "you can never get back" to that unity "you always want to" (Klages 7). Aylmer relates finding his unity to ridding his wife of her birthmark and his desire becomes so strong that the birthmark "trifling as it at first appeared, it so connected itself with innumerable trains of thought and modes of feeling that it became the central point of all" (Hawthorne 171). Aylmer thinks he finds an opportunity to find unity by attempting to create something that will remove Georgiana's birthmark.

Aylmer believes that by uniting his love of science with his love for his wife he will end the separation he feels between the two loves, and by removing the birthmark he will also remove the confusion over the signifier. Aylmer begins his search for unity, the Real stage, by trying to remove the birthmark. He attempts several times, all inevitably resulting in failure as the Real stage is unattainable. He first surrounds her with beautiful holograms, then presents her with a plant, which she kills, and thirdly tries spraying the air with perfume. All of these attempts fail, but Aylmer does not give up hope that he will be able to remove the birthmark and therefore find unity. Aylmer's desire for unity causes him to believe he can achieve unity once again and keeps him persevering to find a "cure" for Georgiana's imperfection and therefore the Real stage. Finally Aylmer mixes a drink, telling his wife, "The concoction of the draught has been perfect.... Unless all my science have deceived me, it cannot fail" (178). Georgiana drinks the potion and falls asleep. Aylmer watches her until he notices that the birthmark "is well-nigh gone!" (179) Aylmer is elated with his success, believing he has found the perfect beauty, his wholeness, for which he was searching only to hear his wife cry out, "Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am

dying!” (179) He comes to her side “as the crimson tint of the birthmark ... faded from her cheek ... and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight” (179). Aylmer’s experience of this perfect beauty, his unity, was fleeting because just as the birthmark was fading away, true wholeness or reaching the Real stage is short lived and unattainable. In the end Hawthorne shows Lacan’s claim that “the ideal concept of a wholly unified and psychologically complete individual is just that, an abstraction that is simply not attainable” (Bressler 129).

Aylmer’s confusion over the birthmark, the signifier, coupled with the separation of his loves, eventually lead him on his unsuccessful quest for unity in perfecting Georgiana’s beauty. Aylmer’s confusion caused by the unstable signifier, the birthmark, is presented along with the impossibility of returning to the pre-linguistic wholeness everyone desires. Since “language shapes and ultimately structures our unconscious and conscious minds and thus shapes our self-identity,” Alymer’s distress over language manifests itself as his desire to get rid of the birthmark (Bressler 129). By reading “The Birthmark” from a Lacanian point of view, the reader is able to define Aylmer much differently than in other readings. Instead of seeing Aylmer as evil and striving for ultimate perfection or reading into the evils or dangers of science, the reader sees Aylmer as a more humane, regular person in the Symbolic stage searching to find unity in the Real stage. This also allows the reader to understand why he tries so desperately to cure—but ultimately kills—his wife over something as seemingly insignificant as a birthmark.

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## 3.11 End-of-Chapter Assessment

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

In this chapter, we examined in depth three major approaches to psychoanalytic literary theory following Freud, Lacan, and Jung:

- For Freud: You learned about the pleasure and reality principles, the notion of the unconscious, the stages of sexual development, dreams as the road to the unconscious, and how to apply a Freudian reading to a text.
- For Lacan: You learned how Lacan took Freud's ideas and placed them in language acquisition, which can be seen in the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real stages, and ultimately how to apply a Lacanian reading to a text.
- For Jung: You learned how Jung broke away from Freud to define the collective unconsciousness, which contains universal archetypes—the Self, shadow, anima, and animus being central archetypes—and ultimately how to apply a Jungian reading to a text.
- You were given the opportunity to see the psychoanalytic methodology practiced in three student papers.
- You learned about the importance of the writing process, including peer review and the strategies for conducting peer review. Many of you also participated in peer review for your psychoanalytic paper.
- You wrote an analysis of a work of literature using one of the theories by Freud, Lacan, or Jung.

### WRITING EXERCISES

1. Freewriting exercise. Choose a short poem (no more than fifteen lines) you've never read before. Read through it several times. As you read the poem, jot down ideas that may relate to a psychoanalytic reading; in particular, consider how the poem could be read from a Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian perspective.
2. Make a claim about the poem for each theory. What claim seems the most productive? The least productive? Discuss why a particular theory works best for the poem.

## INSTRUCTOR SUPPLEMENT: CLASS PEER REVIEW

1. Have students conduct peer review on one of the sample papers using the organizational peer-review guide found in [Chapter 10 "Appendix A: Peer Review Sheets"](#), [Section 10.2 "Chapter 3: Psychoanalysis"](#):
  - a. Place students in groups of three to four and have them reread the paper for peer review and fill out the guide sheet.
  - b. Have students discuss their feedback responses to the sample paper.
  - c. Have students list the major feedback they discussed.
  - d. Put the major issues on the blackboard or whiteboard.
  - e. Discuss these responses. Make certain that you let students know that any paper can be improved.
  
2. Plan to have your students conduct peer review on the drafts of their papers that they are writing in your class. Use the peer-review guide from [Chapter 10 "Appendix A: Peer Review Sheets"](#), [Section 10.2 "Chapter 3: Psychoanalysis"](#) and have them work in groups of three and do the following:
  - a. Bring two hard copies of their paper so that each member can read the paper, OR work in a computer lab where students can share their papers online. You may want to use the educational software that your campus supports—for example, Blackboard or Moodle—or you can have students use Google Drive to set up their peer-review groups.
  - b. Have two students focus on the first paper in the group. While these students are reading, have the other student read the other two student papers.
  - c. The two students should quickly fill out the peer-review sheet and then have a brief conversation about the strengths of the paper and ways the paper could be improved.
  - d. Move to the next student and follow the same process. Depending on the length of your class, you may have to reduce the peer-review groups to two students.
  - e. If time permits, ask the students to provide general comments—or ask questions—about the specific papers or the assignment overall.

- f. You may want to use peer review for each paper in your class.

## 3.12 Suggestions for Further Reading

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