



CHAPTER

7

Minding the Work

Psychological Criticism

When a member of my family complains that he or she has bitten his tongue, bruised her finger, and so on, instead of the expected sympathy I put the question, 'Why did you do that?'

—Sigmund Freud

THE PURPOSE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Psychology began in a sense when the first person, rather than just reacting to another person's behavior, wondered instead, Why did you do that? Most people would agree that modern psychology begins with Freud, not simply because he wonders so intensely, but because he offers a compelling answer: we do things, Freud asserted, really weird and silly things sometimes, for reasons that are to some degree hidden, inaccessible, beyond our direct control or awareness. These hidden motivations come from what Freud called *das Unbewusste*, which means literally "the unknown" but is usually translated into English as "the unconscious," that part or activity of one's mind that is unknown even to its possessor. Although both the term "unconscious" and the

general concept predated Freud, his theories revolutionized the study of the mind.

There is in fact only one major form of psychotherapy that is not based in some important respect on Freudian concepts—behavior therapy. For a psychological theory, behaviorism seems strangely unconcerned with the mind. Basing their approaches on B. F. Skinner's work, who in turn drew largely on Ivan Pavlov, behaviorists view psychological problems as bad habits: the patient has learned unproductive or destructive behaviors and must unlearn them and take up others. Every other therapy, despite some vast differences, depends in crucial ways on Freud. To understand modern psychology and to practice psychological criticism, you need to start with Freud and particularly with his conception of the unconscious mind.

Obviously, you needn't stop there. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, or Erikson's theory of adult development, or any other psychological theories (including your own) may prove very illuminating. I focus here on Freud because his work is historically the starting point, because his ideas are so familiar to educated people, because his works continue to generate challenge and controversy, and because Freud's work nicely illustrates the application of psychology to literature. His theories were based in significant ways on literary works. There's just no way to survey here the whole field of psychology. So I encourage you to study psychology, expanding your understanding of Freud, and exploring also the theories of others.

The therapeutic procedure Freud developed was designed to help those patients whose conscious lives were being troubled or even overtaken by unconscious fears or desires. It involved having the patient lie on a couch and talk freely about whatever came to mind, roaming back through childhood, dreams, fantasies, whatever, thereby allowing the patient and the analyst to gather enough data to speculate about what was going on in the hidden country of the unconscious. By slowly exposing the effects of the unconscious, peeling back layer after layer of disguised and suppressed fears and desires, Freud's "talking cure" was designed to enlarge the mental "territory" of the conscious mind. When the patient, with the analyst's help, could expose these unconscious materials, Freud believed that their power over the patient would be lessened and even dissipated.

When Freud failed to comfort his injured family members, he was not simply creating work for future therapists (unconsciously?), but he was rather assuming that an apparently irrational action like biting one's own tongue might actually have some important underlying explanation. Freud did not expect his family to express their

unconscious motivations ("I bit my tongue because I want to tell you to drop dead, but I know I shouldn't," for instance); rather, he hoped to unearth some evidence of how an unconscious desire was being first covered up or denied and then expressed in a disguised way. He was, in his own way, trying to be a good father.

Freud's theory of the unconscious also revolutionized the study of the mind and launched modern psychology by assuming that the unconscious is inherently sexual. Even children are sexual beings, Freud pointed out, thus scandalizing many of his Victorian contemporaries. Not a few people continue to be scandalized. How this unsettling insight affected Freud's work can be seen in the story of "Little Hans," one of his most famous and remarkable cases. When Hans was brought to Freud at age five, he refused to go outside because he was hysterically terrified that a horse would bite him. Through Hans's father, Freud was able to learn that at age three-and-a-half Hans's mother had tried to discourage him from touching his own genitals by saying that if he didn't stop, the doctor would come to "cut off your widdler and then what will you widdle with?" Freud deduced that Little Hans had noticed that horses had large genitalia and that his mother did not appear to have any, apparently proving that she knew what she was talking about. In the uncanny logic of Little Hans's unconscious mind, castration and horses became all jumbled up with his love for his mother, and the competition with his father for that love. Freud helped the father reassure Little Hans that his own penis was in no danger, curing his irrational fear.

It is, however, incorrect to think of Freud simply as that guy who thought of everything in terms of sex. For one thing, Freud's idea of sexuality includes much more than simply the act of sex. Rather, Freud focused on the entire drive toward physical pleasure, which he saw as being constantly in conflict with opposing forces. This conflict is necessary for rather obvious reasons: without it, we would be unable to function in a civilized society. But our desires, when they cannot be expressed and released, must go somewhere. Hence, the need for an unconscious, a kind of storage vault for psychic energy. In this mental hydraulic system, as Freud sees it, some of the repressed energy does leak out in various disguised ways—in dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, creative writing.

This mechanism for submerging unacceptable desires is well known today as "repression," and it is for Freud an essential activity. Mental illness, then, in which the unconscious is unable to contain satisfactorily the repressed material, becomes different only in degree, not kind, from "normal" mental health.

There's already plenty in the little bit I've discussed to make anyone uneasy: we don't know what's going on in our minds even though that activity is influencing our thinking and behavior. The mechanism whereby our fears and desires are being repressed is the same mechanism that leads to mental illness—meaning that “normal” is a relative term, since we're all unavoidably a little out of touch; the drive toward pleasure is relentlessly struggling to overpower our grip on the realities of our culture. I haven't even gotten to the Oedipus complex, which, despite its “utter centrality to Freud's work,” as Terry Eagleton says (156), is nonetheless outrageous—so disturbingly bizarre that, from a Freudian perspective, there must be something to it.

Freud concisely describes this fundamental sexual phenomenon of early childhood in “The Ego and the Id” (1923). In this accessible paper Freud explains how the young boy invests his desire and affection in his mother, developing an “object-cathexis” for her. The baby's desire for physical contact with his mother obviously begins with the mother's breasts, but the boy will ultimately want to possess his mother entirely. As his “sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense,” Freud says, his father is increasingly “perceived as an obstacle to them.” At this point, desiring his mother, blocked by his father, the young boy has acquired what Freud calls “the simple positive Oedipus complex” (640). Freud is alluding to the ancient myth in which Oedipus, in the course of saving a city, happens unknowingly to kill his father and marry his mother.

Obviously, the desire to do away with the father and join with the mother cannot be acted out without disastrous consequences, and it must therefore be repressed, put out of sight. This “primal repression,” as Freud calls it, is in fact what creates the unconscious, making a place for repressed desires. But if nothing more than this repression happens, then the Oedipus complex will persist in the unconscious, exerting its relentless pressure and eventually creating psychological trouble—a “pathogenic effect.” This ill effect is avoided, Freud says, when the Oedipus complex is destroyed, a process that is brought about by the boy's perception that his father is superior.

And here is where most readers of Freud tend to drop their jaws or even toss the book across the room, because the threat of the father is focused, Freud believes, in the threat of castration. Fearing that the father may negate his affection for the mother by castrating him, the boy (understandably enough) begins a process of transferring his desires elsewhere. (What Little Hans was experiencing was thus a more intense variation of a “normal” process.) The part of

the mind that “retains the character of the father,” who comes to stand for the restraints of “authority, religious teaching, schooling, and reading,” Freud calls the “superego.” In struggling to control the ego, the superego is opposed by the id, the repository of basic instincts and desires. The relationship between the id and ego, as Freud puts it in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, is like that “between a rider and his horse” (108). The rider is supposed to direct the horse's energy, but sometimes the rider has “to guide his horse in the direction in which it itself wants to go.”

Think of the id as Jack Nicholson or Roseanne—irreverent, indulgent, spontaneous, raucous. Think of the ego as Robert Duvall or Meryl Streep—smooth, adaptable, responsible, an actor. And the superego is like Jimmy Carter or Miss Manners—principled, moral, wholesome, occupied with doing the right thing.¹

Thus, Freud offers two maps of the mind. First, conscious versus unconscious, then later, this division is refined into the id, ego, superego model. The id is largely the territory of the unconscious, and the ego and superego are mostly conscious.

Freud has not been alone in revising his ideas. His earliest followers rather quickly offered major additions, divergences, and rejections of various Freudian features. Melanie Klein, for instance, emphasized the turbulence of the pre-Oedipal period when the child wants to possess and destroy the mother. Harry Stack Sullivan turned from Freud's emphasis on internal conflicts to concentrate on the individual's relationships with important people in his life. The “good” mother, Sullivan says, conveys security and contentment to the child, whereas the “bad” mother communicates her anxiety and distress to the child, who must adjust his or her own behavior to modify the mother's stress. Carl Jung downplayed Freud's emphasis on sex and supplemented the individual unconscious with the idea of a “collective unconscious” that contains themes and images inherited by all humans. Jungian approaches to psychological criticism look for such recurrent themes and images across time and across cultures, seeing them as clues to the structuring of the collective unconscious mind.

Today little of Freud's work is accepted without substantial modification or challenge. Fortunately, in order to do psychological criticism you don't need to wait until the truth of all Freud's particular theories has been settled; and you don't need to understand

¹ In *An Incomplete Education*, Judy Jones and William Wilson compare the id, ego, and superego to Nicholson, Duvall, and Reeve (402).

all the various refinements and refutations and wholesale rethinking of Freud that continue to appear. The more you know about psychology, to be sure, the more options you're likely to have as a critic. But all you really need to understand in order to do psychological criticism is Freud's fundamental concept of the unconscious—a concept that has remained the unchallenged starting point for most subsequent psychological theories. The purpose of psychology depends on bringing to consciousness the hidden fears and desires that disturb and control our lives. And the purpose of psychological criticism likewise is to direct Freud's question—"Why did you do that?"—to authors, or characters, or readers. Looking at the author, psychological criticism tries to go beyond the biographical facts to expose the underlying motivations—motivations and meanings that the author herself or himself may not have glimpsed. Looking at a character, psychological criticism treats the author's creation as a person whose behavior can be explained psychologically. Looking at the reader, psychological criticism considers how the reader's motivations shape the meaning of the work.

The next section discusses how to carry out such tasks.

HOW TO DO PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Psychology and literary criticism have been intertwined from their very beginnings. Plato noted that poets indulge in a kind of madness when they write, stirring up the audience's passions and emotions. A well-ordered republic, Plato thought, would be better off without poets. Aristotle countered Plato's argument with the position that literature has a healthy psychological effect; in the case of tragedy, it purges excessive fear and pity. Longinus felt that literature could cultivate the audience's sense of the sublime, elevating and refining their sensibilities.

Freud's practice of using literary works to illustrate his theories, or test them, or even suggest them, has been continued by psychological thinkers of every variety. Alfred Adler, for instance, one of the earliest theorists to break away from Freud, believed his own psychological insights were drawn largely from literary works; he even asserted that "the artist is the leader of mankind on the road to absolute truth" (329). In "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908) Freud lays the foundation for applying psychology to literature. The author's creative production is, for Freud, like the material of a dream: it is a "day-dream," shaped and therefore disguised

substantially by the unconscious mind. A work of literature then is like the material the analyst receives from his or her patients. Acts of literary criticism and psychological analysis begin to look very much alike, if they are not in fact the same. In both cases, the interpreter examines a text and reconstructs an underlying meaning and significance. (A text cannot, to be sure, respond to interrogation—at least not in the way that a patient can.)

Since these underlying meanings of the patient's or the author's stories belong by definition to the realm of the hidden and directly unknowable, a certain amount of creativity and imagination on the part of the interpreter are not only authorized but also called for. In addition to creativity, some basic concepts and terms will be useful. These originate with Freud, but they've become part of the psychological vocabulary, and to varying degrees they've even filtered into the common language.

I've already mentioned *repression*, the mind's essential strategy for hiding desires and fears. But out of sight does not mean out of mind in this case. Consider for a moment the following poem, which despite its simplicity has received much critical attention:

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal (1800)

William Wordsworth

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force; 5
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

This poem appears in a series of poems about "Lucy," a girl who died young. No historical "Lucy" has been found by researchers, and she appears to have been a fiction. If we ask Freud's question of Wordsworth, Why did you do that?, we will have to make up our own answer: even if he were alive, Wordsworth's own answer could not be trusted because the real reason for the poem might well be hidden in his unconscious. So let us ask ourselves, What wish or fear or desire might Wordsworth be expressing here in a disguised form?

When Wordsworth wrote this poem, he was living with his sister in deep poverty in Germany, enduring an extremely cold winter. His sister, Dorothy, was his lifelong companion, living with him

throughout his marriage. Several of Wordsworth's poems are dedicated to her; several of his poems in fact borrow from her quite brilliant journals. Wordsworth and his sister were very close.

When Wordsworth sent this poem to Samuel Coleridge, Coleridge wrote to another friend that "in some gloomier moment" Wordsworth had "fancied the moment in which his sister might die" (1.479). If the poem is in some way about the death of Wordsworth's sister, then it certainly does represent a profound fear for Wordsworth. And yet, the poem is oddly unemotional. The speaker "had" no fears; "she" feels nothing; the speaker's "spirit" is sleeping and sealed off.

To a psychologist (or a psychological critic), the experience of an event without any of the expected response is called *isolation*. In Cheever's "Reunion," I would argue, Charlie employs isolation to deal with the last time he saw his father. He doesn't overtly deny his emotions, or try to explain them away, or express them; he appears simply to ignore them, disconnecting from them, selectively telling us what happened. One could also argue, I think, that Hemingway's soldier exhibits isolation in "A Very Short Story."

But why would Wordsworth refuse to acknowledge the profound grief one would expect to arise at the idea of his sister's death? A psychological view, looking at the intimacy of Wordsworth's relationship with his sister, would have to wonder if perhaps he isn't protecting himself against desires he cannot acknowledge. If Wordsworth did have, for example, an incestuous desire for his sister, whom he certainly loved deeply, acknowledging that desire would certainly cause him great psychological pain. In fantasy, in his poetry, he could deal with that desire indirectly by imagining his sister, or her surrogate Lucy, as being dead. Channeling an unacceptable urge into some artistic creation or fantasy is called *sublimation*. We see it in Lucille Clifton's "forgiving my father" (see Chapter 3), which transforms her hatred for her father into a work that moves her toward forgiveness. Sublimation is no doubt at work in Mary Astell's *Proposal* (see Chapter 8), in which her inevitable rage against an oppressive patriarchy becomes the driving force behind her proposal for women to secede.

If Wordsworth is substituting Lucy for Dorothy, he is also engaging in *displacement*, which inserts a safe object of emotion for a dangerous one. We might argue, for example, that Milton's focus on his blindness, in "When I Consider How My Light Is Spent," is a substitute for a more frightening loss of light, his death.

But perhaps we're on entirely the wrong track here, or perhaps there are simply other tracks available. My initial reading of Wordsworth's poem was that "she" is his own spirit. Otherwise, what

sense does the initial line make, "A slumber did my spirit seal"? He imagines his own death and depicts his soul as being feminine. "I had no human fears" becomes an instance then of *denial*, in which one simply falsifies reality, flatly and directly refusing to accept it. While repression buries the emotion and other strategies hide or disguise it, denial looks right at it and says it isn't there. Denial can be a more ominous symptom as it signals a break with reality. When Hemingway's soldier in "A Very Short Story" (see Chapter 4) says he doesn't want to see any of his friends, it seems likely he's engaging in denial.

One could also argue, pursuing a different angle, that the critic who claims Wordsworth's poem deals with his incestuous desires is practicing *projection*: "Oh yeah, I see Wordsworth's repressed incestuous desires," the critic says, when it is actually his or her own incestuous desires, projected onto Wordsworth, that are being seen and avoided.

Or one could argue the whole enterprise of criticism is motivated by *intellectualization*, a strategy for avoiding uncomfortable emotions by rationalizing them, analyzing them, talking and talking and talking about them. Intellectualization is isolation for intellectuals.

If we imagine that Wordsworth was terrified of ghosts and spirits, that he feared they were wandering all over the place, and that he was especially convinced that he would become a restless ghoul himself, then we could see the poem as a *reaction formation*, in which one is convinced that the opposite of a terrible situation is actually the case. Although Wordsworth, in this scenario, is convinced that spirits roam the earth, he keeps telling himself insistently that "slumber" actually seals one's spirit, leaving it as dead as a rock. In "My Father's Martial Art," Stephen Shu-ning Liu says his father and his Master are sitting on O Mei mountain (see Chapter 3). To the extent that he believes this statement, he is arguably employing a reaction formation, for the poem makes rather clear that his father is dead. He cannot come down and hush the traffic. He—at least his body—isn't sitting anywhere.

As you're thinking about how to apply psychological theories to literature in specific ways, you might also consider the more general effects of a psychological perspective. I'd like to bring two consequences to your attention.

Students often ask English teachers, "Do you really think the author intended to mean all that?" Which often means, of course, "Aren't you being too clever, reading too much into this, making a big deal out of something that isn't there?" After Freud, such a question becomes irrelevant. The author himself or herself can't really know what was intended because of the inevitable involvement of

the unconscious mind. We may think we intend one thing, but our unconscious intentions may be very different and much more complex. Our intention may even be contradictory because the unconscious mind isn't worried about logical consistency. By analyzing the work closely, we may gain some insight into what the author really intended—but we're always just guessing. At the least, we can be confident that the meaning of any statement is richer than it seems.

This point brings me to the second consequence of an awareness of psychological criticism, which is closely related to the first one. After Freud, what idea could possibly be too far out to consider? Psychological theories ought to encourage you to be creative in speculating about the motivations of characters, authors, or readers. When students write uninteresting papers, it's often because they're too vague on the one hand or too cautious on the other. I would like to think that an acquaintance with psychological criticism will tend to loosen your imagination.

THE WRITING PROCESS: A SAMPLE ESSAY

Hamlet, as you might imagine, has been the subject of considerable psychological analysis, beginning most notably with Ernst Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus*, which made much of Hamlet's bedroom scene with his mother. In some versions of the play, Sir Laurence Olivier's for instance, Hamlet's physical attraction to his mother is shockingly obvious, as Hamlet pushes his mother onto her bed, holding her down, ranting and raving about her affection for Claudius, his uncle, the murderer of his father, now his step-father. I'm going to look at a passage that seems to me much less promising. If there are psychological analyses of this passage, I'm not aware of them. In fact, I thought at first, after picking the passage at random, that a psychological reading wouldn't work. So, you're going to see the evolution of a psychological reading of this passage.

But first you'll see the passage. In this scene, from act four, scene four, Hamlet has just observed the army of Fortinbras moving to attack a part of Poland. The land the two armies are fighting over is insignificant; Fortinbras' captain says he wouldn't pay "five ducats" to farm it. And yet thousands of men and thousands of ducats will be wasted to fight over it. Hearing this, Hamlet speaks the soliloquy below. Read it carefully and consider what you might say about it from a psychological perspective.

Hamlet 4.4.32-66 (1600)

William Shakespeare

inform against: [How all occasions do inform against me,
accuse market: And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
product If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.] 35

discourse: [Sure He that made us with such large
reasoning power, discourse,
language Looking before and after, gave us not
fust: develop That capability and godlike reason
mold craven: To fust in us unus'd. Now whether it be
cowardly event: Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
the result Of thinking too precisely on th' event—
A thought which quarter'd hath but
one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
[Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"

Sith: since Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, 45
and means

gross: huge, To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:
obvious Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd

Makes mouths: Makes mouths at the invisible event, 50
taunts, scorns Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw 55
When honor's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men, 60
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain. O, from this time forth, 65
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

displacement
denial
sample
projection
intellectualizing

Preparing to Write

One strategy to generate ideas would be simply to run through various psychological concepts and see how each one relates to the play. To see how this heuristic would work, let's first review the concepts that have been mentioned in this chapter (which are by no means all the psychological ideas you might draw on):

- *Isolation*: Understanding something that should be upsetting, but failing to react to it. The person thus *isolates* an event or stimulus, separating it from his or her feelings. "Yes, my uncle murdered my father and married my mother, but so what? I've got a theology exam next Tuesday at the University of Wittenberg, and I just can't worry about it now."
- *Intellectualization*: Analyzing and rationalizing rather than feeling and reacting. The topic isn't forgotten or ignored; it's just turned into an intellectual issue. "I am conducting a study on the incidence of ghost appearances here in Denmark, and I am especially interested in how often the ghost is the father appearing to his son, as in my own case."
- *Repression*: Selectively forgetting about whatever is troubling. "Ghost? What ghost? Oh yeah, *that* ghost. Well, we'd better get some lunch right now."
- *Projection*: Denying thoughts and feelings by attributing them to someone else. "You know, Horatio is just about paralyzed with uncertainties and doubts. And I think he may be sexually attracted to my mother, too."
- *Displacement*: Shifting an emotion from its real target to another one. Usually, a threatening, powerful target is exchanged for a safer one. "Don't talk to me about Claudius right now. I'm busy plotting to kill those sorry traitors Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."
- *Denial*: Falsifying reality. "I didn't see any ghost. My father is still alive."
- *Reversal*: Asserting the opposite of the truth, turning an emotion around. "I'm not attracted to my mother. I've noticed that she's attracted to me, however."
- *Reaction formation*: A pattern of behavior that repeatedly reverses the truth; an obsessive kind of denial. "First, I'll shine Claudius's boots. Then I'll sharpen and polish his sword."

Then I'll dust his desk off and see what else I can do. He's my uncle, and I like him so much."

Now, let's see how these concepts apply to that particular passage from act four, scene four, lines 32–66. The idea here is to think about each term and then brainstorm about the passage in relation to that concept. You may want to brainstorm some on your own before you check out my own meditations below:

Isolation: What is Hamlet not feeling that he should be feeling? This question seems easy to answer. Hamlet himself tells us that he should be feeling bloodthirsty rage, yet his revenge is "dull." So he tries to exhort himself to feel what he should, rather than existing in a "Bestial oblivion," feeling nothing.

Intellectualization: Hamlet offers two possible explanations for his delay in lines 39–41. "Bestial oblivion" (or isolation) is one; "thinking too precisely on th' event" (or intellectualization) is the other. Both these strategies are used to avoid feeling emotions—which is precisely what Hamlet sees himself doing.

Repression: What is Hamlet ignoring? What obvious feeling does he totally pass over? Certainly he recognizes that he should be vengeful but isn't; but Hamlet seems to look right past what would seem most important: he doesn't want to die. If Hamlet kills Claudius, he may lose his own life. He may have, as he says, "cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't," but he has no guarantee that he can do it safely. This avoidance is, I think, a major repression, and it is bound to express itself somewhere. In fact, this whole passage can be seen as an effort to ignore what he is most pressed to say: that he fears throwing away his life.

Projection: Does Hamlet use projection to disguise his feeling that taking his revenge will mean throwing away his life? There is his reference to the "delicate and tender prince" who is willing to expose "what is mortal and unsure" for the sake of "an egg-shell." Of course Hamlet does not know how the other prince feels, or really whether he is "delicate and tender." The other prince may well believe that the upcoming battle is a small but glorious part of an epic campaign—not that he is fighting for an eggshell, but that the battle is strategically, symbolically, historically, personally of major proportions. It is in fact Hamlet who, deep inside, feels that he, a

delicate and tender prince, a student and theater-goer, is being asked to act like a warrior and throw away his life for an eggshell. He says, "That guy is throwing his life away for an eggshell." His unconscious meaning: "I'm throwing my life away for an eggshell."

A problem here: Can we really say that Hamlet views his cause as an eggshell? He has "a father kill'd, a mother stain'd." These would seem to be more than an eggshell. But his revenge will not alter his father's death. He'll be just as dead after Hamlet acts. Nor will Hamlet's revenge undo the stain on his mother. Although men will "find quarrel in a straw / When honor's at the stake," her honor has already been tarnished by Claudius, hasn't it? Early in the play Hamlet has referred to his world as "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (1.2.135-37). So perhaps the world and his cause are no more than an eggshell for Hamlet.

Displacement: Instead of venting his anger at Claudius, who is dangerous, Hamlet is attacking himself.

Denial: Hamlet says he does not know why he hasn't acted, but the reason is right in front of him: he doesn't want to be like the twenty thousand men already marching to their meaningless deaths. He is denying that he knows.

Reversal: Hamlet says that the twenty thousand men are marching to their "imminent" deaths "to my shame." Isn't he turning that around, however? Isn't it really to their own shame? Hamlet acknowledges that their deaths will not mean anything significant; shouldn't they be ashamed of such senseless slaughter? The ground won't even be able to hold them, Hamlet says; but that has already been true of the bodies Hamlet has encountered: his father won't stay put; Polonius's body eludes the court; Ophelia's body floats away and surfaces again in her grave. One must wonder if the ground can ever contain the bodies put into it.

Reaction formation: Does Hamlet convince himself that the exact opposite of something bad, something that he doesn't want to confront, is going on, and that it is good? Hamlet knows that he must eventually carry out his revenge, giving in to a need for revenge that does not make conscious sense to him. His ego is being pressed by the superego, who is literally his father figure, calling for justice. His ego is also being pressed by his id, which

hungers for violence, indulgence. He wants to give in to something bad: the violent energy of his id. But he tells himself he doesn't want to.

Let's try that again. Hamlet knows unconsciously that he must behave violently, like an animal, a savage, in order to carry out his revenge. He must become a beast. Yet, he tells himself the opposite. He is a beast, he says, if he doesn't carry out his revenge.

The conflict in Hamlet's mind over whether he should be a beast or not, whether he should exercise "godlike reason" or not, seems designed for relating to the id, ego, and superego. So those terms could also be used as prompts in the invention phase.

Id—Hamlet says all occasions "spur" his revenge—as if it were a horse. Freud in fact compares the id to a horse. It is Hamlet's id that will have to motivate his revenge: logically, he can't do it. But Hamlet doesn't want to be "a beast," in "bestial oblivion." If he lets the id's horse run, however, that's exactly what he'll be.

Ego—So his ego is caught in the middle, driven to commit suicide without any consciously satisfying reason.

Superego—Justice, the moral code, the stand-in for the father: in this case, the ghost of the father isn't just in his head, he's walking about. Like the id, Hamlet's superego calls for revenge, which the ego recognizes as requiring its own extinction. No wonder Hamlet is caught in the middle, unable to act. He says at the end his thoughts will be bloody—but he doesn't say anything about his actions.

Is this enough material for an essay? How would you organize it?

Shaping

Is there a thesis floating around in the brainstorming above? It seems clear that I'm returning again and again to the question of why Hamlet is not taking his revenge. Why is he standing there talking rather than doing something? He thinks he should be killing people, or at least one particular person, yet he hasn't done it. And the conclusion of his speech, which seems to announce his action, on closer analysis just says his thoughts will be bloody. The next scene in the play isn't Hamlet bursting in on Claudius and cutting his throat.

So, my thesis might be that this passage helps us understand Hamlet's hesitation—his mental conflict. How? Why? First, I list what I think I know:

1. Hamlet's father and his superego (one stands in for the other) call for justice. Morality has been violated and it must be set right. "Honor's at the stake," as Hamlet says.
2. For some reason, this call to violence is insufficient. Hamlet avoids coming to terms with it for much of the play. How?
3. I said when I was developing ideas that Hamlet's unconscious wants to be bloody. But that really doesn't make sense, does it?

Let us imagine that Freud's comparison of the id to a horse is very appropriate. Let us further imagine that when Hamlet says the occasions should "spur" his revenge, he is speaking about the kinds of urges and passions that Freud assigns to the unconscious. So why is Hamlet's unconscious unwilling to kill Claudius? For the reader who assumes Hamlet's behavior is motivated—that "Hamlet" can be discussed as if he were a personality and not a set of lines in a play, a fiction—this unwillingness is the nub of the problem.

Acting as a psychological critic, I want to persuade my audience to accept my explanation of Hamlet's behavior. To do that, I need to look some more at the text and ask a few more questions.

Why would anyone be unwilling to kill someone who deserved it? I've already noted above that Hamlet doesn't want to throw away his life. He's not convinced, even though his superego or his father tell him he should be, that killing Claudius is worth it. But this stuff is logical: this is the "thinking too precisely" that Hamlet mentions. The other reason, the "bestial oblivion," is more primitive.

I haven't yet drawn on Freud's crucial Oedipal complex, and it finally occurs to me that here's where it comes into play: Hamlet doesn't want to kill Claudius because at some level he can't blame Claudius. When Hamlet says he stands with "a father kill'd, a mother stain'd," he is in exactly the Oedipal position that Freud says the unconscious desires to be in. Hamlet calls these events "Excitements of my reason and my blood," and they are exciting, but not in a way that he consciously recognizes. He finds at some deeper level himself excited and unable to be enraged at Claudius for carrying out his own deep-seated wish.

At this point, I think I have a rough plan for an essay:

The problem: how can this passage be used to help readers understand Hamlet's hesitation?

The answer: we see him using some classic strategies to avoid two realities: (1) killing Claudius will probably involve getting himself killed, and he just can't justify that; (2) killing Claudius will involve killing himself in a symbolic sense because Claudius has done what he wanted to do, unconsciously: kill his father and sleep with his mother.

And here's a draft, worked out from this plan.

The Psychology of Hamlet's Hesitation: A Reading of 4.4.32–66

Introduces the
problem: why
does Hamlet
hesitate?

Possible
explanations.

But Hamlet
himself doesn't
agree with
these.

Oedipus
complex
extended to
hesitation.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would be a simple case of king-killing and revenge except for one thing: Hamlet hesitates. Like Mona Lisa's smile, Hamlet's delay in carrying out his revenge is puzzling because we do not know his motivation. Some possible reasons are obvious. Perhaps he is not sure that the ghost is telling the truth. Perhaps he is waiting for the perfect revenge, when Claudius is doing something evil rather than praying, thus increasing the near-certainty that he will go to hell. Perhaps he wants to survive his revenge-taking. Perhaps he just wants to be sure he can succeed.

Any or all of these reasons might well be sufficient to explain Hamlet's delay, but Hamlet does not himself accept these reasons. In act 4, scene 4, after repeated efforts at self-analysis, Hamlet can still say:

I do not know
Why yet I live to say, 'This
thing's to do,'
Sith I have cause, and will, and
strength, and means
To do't. (43–46)

If Hamlet does not know by this time why he is waiting, then perhaps the cause of his delay is not conscious or rational.

Hamlet's psychology has often been examined. The idea that Hamlet's attitude toward his mother is motivated by an Oedipus

complex is well known. But Hamlet's hesitation to revenge his father's death can also be profitably connected to his unconscious psychology as an examination of his soliloquy in act 4, scene 4 will show. Hamlet is unable to admit to himself that "honor" is not a sufficient reason for self-sacrifice; nor is he able to understand that he identifies with Claudius, despite his detestation of him.

After observing Fortinbras and his army advancing to fight and die for a small piece of worthless ground, Hamlet exclaims: "How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge!" (32-33). When Hamlet says that all occasions "spur" his revenge, he compares his mind to a horse being spurred. But the next few lines clash with this metaphor: "What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more" (33-35). Hamlet wants his revenge to be bestial, yet he censures those who act like beasts. He's caught in a dilemma: how to be "spurred" without becoming less than human?

Hamlet's denial of the realm of Freud's id, the realm of bestial desires, is expanded upon in the next few lines:

Sure He that made us with such
large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave
us not
That capability and godlike
reason
To fust in us unus'd. (36-39)

In saying that we are made "with such large discourse," Hamlet is pointing out the vastness of man's reasoning ability, which makes him, Hamlet believes, "godlike." Unlike the id, man's ego is able to look to the future and the past, "Looking before and after." We should use that reason. But using our reason does not promote violent action, as Hamlet's next few lines indicate:

A problem:
revenge equals
the bestial.

Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven
scruple
Of thinking too precisely on
th' event—
A thought which quarter'd hath
but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do
not know
Why yet I live to say, "This
thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause, and will, and
strength, and means
To do't. (39-46)

Neither bestial oblivion nor the rational mind seem conducive to revenge. After asserting that he should use his reason, rather than letting it get moldy, Hamlet says that reasoning blocks decisive action. To kill Claudius, Hamlet must assume a "godlike" role, handing out justice; yet his godlike faculty does not support such dangerous action any more than his bestial instincts support it.

Consciously unaware of this conflict, Hamlet continues to berate himself, saying "Examples gross as earth exhort me." That is precisely the problem: his reason obstructs his action, and the examples exhorting him are "gross as earth." The kind of primitive, bestial violence required of Hamlet is foreign to him. He has suppressed his bestial self even as he recognizes on one level that it needs spurring. Hamlet seems to think he is exhorting himself to action when he points to the massive army, which is "Exposing what is mortal and unsure / To all that fortune, death, and danger dare, / Even for an egg-shell" (51-53). But the logical absurdity of the example actually works against Hamlet's desire: anyone who thinks about it at all will realize that it is stupid for men to die for an eggshell.

Humankind
ought not be
bestial.

Reasoning
works against
revenge.

Further
support.

Hamlet's cause is not an eggshell, and the next few lines indicate further just how deluded Hamlet is in his comparisons:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great
argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a
straw
When honor's at the stake. (53–56)

His case is not a straw, and the idea that one should not stir "without great argument" actually justifies his delay, even though Hamlet consciously believes he is talking himself into taking action. What is perhaps most intriguing here, however, is the question of how Hamlet's "honor" is involved. The play would seem to be about murder, regicide, and justice. Compared to these, honor would seem to be a minor concern.

But the relevance of honor emerges in the next lines:

*Honor and
revenge.*

How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a
mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and
my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my
shame I see
The imminent death of twenty
thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of
fame
Go to their graves like beds,
fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try
the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and
continent
To hide the slain? (56–65)

Hamlet feels that his mother is "stain'd," even though it is unclear that she knows anything about Claudius's murder. But Hamlet has already shown himself to be obsessed with his mother's sexuality, especially in the bedroom scene. And the lines following the mention of his mother's stain demonstrate Hamlet's subconscious expression of his own desire. He refers to the "Excitements of . . . my blood," and to "sleep," to "fantasy" and a "trick," and to "beds." While Hamlet is consciously focused on burying the dead in an insufficient tomb, his bestial self is concerned with his mother's womb and dying in a sexual sense.

Thus we can see that Hamlet fails to take action because his rational ego and his bestial id block his revenge, and because his own Oedipal desire to do what Claudius has done—kill his father and possess his stained mother—tends to defuse his resolve. We may notice that the conclusion of his soliloquy does not call for bloody actions. Instead, he says, "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (65–66). Hamlet's psychological conflicts block his action. He cannot actively seek revenge; revenge must come to him, and when it does, his hesitation will be justified by his own doom.

*Honor and the
Oedipal urge.*

*Conclusion:
Hamlet's
psychological
conflicts
account for his
hesitation.*

PRACTICING PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Freud's theories, as numerous critics have observed, take the male sex as the norm. How does the Oedipus complex apply to little girls? Their first physical pleasure is also contact with the mother; do little girls wish to sleep with their mothers and kill their fathers? Freud was himself mystified by the problem of applying his theories to women, the "dark continent" as he once called them, but he did try to explain how girls passed through the Oedipus complex. Instead of "castration anxiety," which causes the little boy to submit to reality and his father, turning his desires elsewhere, the little girl perceives that she is already "castrated." Is there then no reason that the little girl should turn her affections from her mother? Freud's

solution was the notorious concept of “penis envy”—an idea that continues even today to drive people up the wall. The little girl turns to her father, Freud said, because she realizes that her mother also has been “castrated.” This envy is hardly as powerful as the fear of castration, it would seem, and Freud did believe that the super-ego of women was not as powerfully formed as that of men and that women consequently had weaker ideas of justice and authority. The complementary idea of womb envy apparently did not occur to Freud, but it seems equally if not more plausible.

If this all seems too bizarre, let me briefly suggest once more why I’m bringing this up here. Freud’s thinking is the foundation of psychological criticism, and the Oedipus complex is central to Freud. Freud’s struggles to make this complex work for little girls resulted in his concept of penis envy. And this concept can be interestingly tested with the following poem.

A Narrow Fellow in the Grass (1866)

Emily Dickinson

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—did you not
His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb— 5
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for Corn— 10
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stooping to secure it 15
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature’s People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality— 20

But never met this Fellow
Attended or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

Questions

1. This poem was one of the few poems published while Dickinson was alive. It appeared under the title “The Snake,” which was not Dickinson’s title, but the addition of an editor. Does that title detract from the poem?
2. Which words in the poem seem odd in the context of a snake?
3. From a Freudian perspective, paraphrase the poem: that is, narrate what happens.
4. Why does Dickinson make the speaker of this poem “a Boy”?
5. What might “Zero at the Bone” mean? What fear or desire might be expressed by this phrase?

* * *

O to Be a Dragon (1951)

Marianne Moore

If I, like Solomon, . . .
could have my wish—
my wish . . . O to be a dragon,
a symbol of the power of Heaven—of silkworm
size or immense; at times invisible. 5
Felicitous phenomenon.

Questions

1. Can this poem be related to Dickinson’s “narrow Fellow” poem?
2. In what way does a psychological perspective alter your reaction to this poem?

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