

WHY FREUD?

Sigmund Freud's impact on how we think, and how we think about how we think, has been enormous. The twentieth century has been called the Freudian century, and whatever the twenty-first century chooses to believe about the workings of the human mind, it will be, on some level, indebted to Freud (of course, this may be a debt that involves reacting against his ideas as much as it involves subscribing to them). Freud's theory, psychoanalysis, suggested new ways of understanding, amongst other things, love, hate, childhood, family relations, civilisation, religion, sexuality, fantasy and the conflicting emotions that make up our daily lives. Today we all live in the shadow of Freud's innovative and controversial concepts. In their scope and subsequent impact Freud's writings embody a core of ideas that amount to more than the beliefs of a single thinker. Rather they function like myths for our culture; taken together, they present a way of looking at the world that has been powerfully transformative. The poet W.H. Auden probably put it best when he wrote of Freud: 'if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd, / to us he is no more a person / now but a whole climate of opinion / under which we conduct our different lives' ('In Memory of Sigmund Freud', Auden 1976: 275).

But what is this strange 'climate of opinion', psychoanalysis? How did a turn-of-the-century Viennese doctor, who may now seem to us often wrong and sometimes absurd, become so central to our vision of

ourselves as thinking, feeling beings in the twentieth century? And if psychoanalysis really is ‘often wrong and sometimes absurd’, why read it at all? While providing a compact introduction to Freud’s life, important concepts and key texts, this study also aims to offer some answers to these wider questions. Putting psychoanalysis in context theoretically and historically will allow us to understand better why, when we look around us, psychoanalytic ideas are pervasive, not only in university bookshops and psychiatric offices, but also in newspapers, movies, modern art exhibits, romantic fiction, self-help books and TV talk shows – in short, everywhere where we find our culture reflecting back images of ourselves. Modern literary criticism has been particularly influenced by psychoanalysis, and this book will foreground that fact in two ways: by examining Freud’s readings of literature and subsequent critics’ uses of Freud; and by introducing Freud’s own writings using the techniques of literary criticism.

Three key concepts are helpful to keep in mind when beginning to read Freud: sexuality, memory and interpretation. By thinking about the sometimes conflicting and complicated meanings of these three common words we can cover a lot of psychoanalytic ground. Psychoanalysis provides both a theory of the history of the individual mind – its early development, its frustrations and desires (which include sexual, or what Freud calls libidinal, desires) – and a set of specific therapeutic techniques for recalling, interpreting and coming to terms with that individual history. Sex, memory, interpretation – psychoanalysis shows how these three apparently disparate terms are connected to each other.

Freud’s name is indissolubly linked with sex. His theories of the mind emphasise the early development of sexuality in the infant child, and the adult psychological illnesses that emerge in the conflict between individual sexual desires and society’s demands not to indulge in these unruly urges. It is for his ideas about the importance of sexuality that Freud is perhaps most famous (some would say notorious). Memory, like sex, is also a straightforward concern of Freud’s; psychoanalysis calls on individuals to recall the childhood events and fantasies that shaped their personalities. But why stress this other term, interpretation?

To answer this question, I’d like to explore one widespread image of Freud as sex-obsessed. One popular (and mistaken) assumption about psychoanalysis is that it claims that everything refers finally to sexual

desire; even if you're sure you're thinking about something else, a Freudian will insist that you're really thinking about sex. A patient lying on a couch tells an analyst that he dreamt last night about a train going through a tunnel. Aha! The analyst exclaims, stroking his long white beard. The train is a phallic symbol and the tunnel a vaginal one: you were fantasising about having sex with your mother.

We might imagine this scene taking place in a movie making fun of psychoanalysis. But even in this parodic example of what Freud would call 'wild analysis', we can recognise the central importance of interpretation to the analytic scene. The analyst sees the elements of the patient's dream in terms of what they symbolise; he *reads* and *interprets* them (or in this case, one might say, forces an interpretation upon them). Psychoanalysis is a theory of reading first and foremost; it suggests that there are always more meanings to any statement than there appear to be at first glance. For the analyst a train is never just a train. To employ some of the metaphors that are so central to Freud's terminology, one critical goal of psychoanalysis is towards searching *behind* and *below* the surface content of the language of our everyday life. Many of Freud's important early books, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) read like primers on how to interpret the deeper meanings of various communications and miscommunications that pass through the individual mind and between people: random thoughts, dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, moments of forgetting, etc.

Knowing how to read a dream, daydream or slip of the tongue – to unlock its symbolism and understand its multiple meanings, is a process not unlike reading a novel or a poem. When we read literature critically, we discover many different layers and meanings – some of which may contradict each other. Reading Freud's works, one must always be willing to immerse oneself in contradiction. He revises and rewrites his early theories in his later work. His body of psychoanalytic writings spans the period from the 1880s to his death in the late 1930s; often he contradicts one of his own earlier ideas or finds evidence to suggest he was wrong the first time around. Because of the length of time over which he wrote, and the breadth of his speculative and clinical thought, there are always different, often conflicting, positions to emphasise when reading Freud. This introduction to Freud sees these conflicts as a strength rather than a weakness of psychoanalytic

thinking, and works through Freud's writings with an eye towards the productiveness of contradiction. Reading Freud properly means reading him carefully. Even when you think you know what he's going to say, he may surprise you.

The terrain that psychoanalysis explores is that of the individual **psyche**.

PSYCHE

Originating from Greek myth, the word *psyche* originally referred to the soul. But psychoanalytic terminology does not use soul in a religious sense. Rather the *psyche* is the mental apparatus as it is defined in contrast to the body or the **soma**. (A somatic illness is one that is caused by bodily rather than mental factors.)

The key to the *psyche* that Freud asks us to read, the storehouse of conflicting energies and disguised desires, is the individual's **unconscious**. For Freud every thought is unconscious before it is conscious: 'Psychoanalysis regarded everything mental as being in the first instance unconscious; the further quality of "consciousness" might also be present, or again it might be absent' (Freud 1925a: 214).

UNCONSCIOUS

The unconscious for Freud, can be defined in several different ways, but it is primarily the storehouse of instinctual desires and needs. Childhood wishes and memories live on in unconscious life, even if they have been erased from consciousness. The unconscious is, in a sense, the great waste-paper basket of the mind – the trash that never gets taken out: 'in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish – ... everything is somehow preserved and ... in suitable circumstances ... it can once more be brought to light' (Freud 1930: 256).

We will return to and refine our definition of this central psychoanalytic concept later, in our discussion of Freud's topography (mapping) of the mind in Chapter 5, but this definition of the unconscious will suffice as an initial explanation.

Besides defining certain key psychoanalytic concepts, before we can grasp Freud's ideas it is necessary to understand something about how his theories formed and changed in response to the surrounding intellectual and political climate. The rest of this introductory chapter will provide a short history of Freud's life and cultural circumstances. The next short chapter will provide a roughly chronological account of the early ideas that led to his initial development of psychoanalytic theory and practice.

LIFE AND CONTEXT

What then were the historical and personal circumstances that helped fashion the man Sigmund Freud and the theory and clinical practice, psychoanalysis, that is inseparable from his name? Freud was born on 6 May 1856 in the Moravian town of Freiberg. He was the son of a Jewish wool merchant, Jacob Freud and his third wife Amalie. When Freud was four his family moved to Vienna, where he would continue to live and work for the next seventy-nine years before being forced to leave because of the threat of Nazi persecution in 1938. In that year he and his family emigrated to England, where he died on 23 September 1939.

Outwardly Freud's life was not terribly eventful until his family's somewhat dramatic escape from Vienna. If Freud created a revolution with his new ideas about sexuality and unconscious desires, the battles he fought were conceptual ones rather than active ones. It is fair to say that he took the intellectual and cultural atmosphere he grew up in and made something new with it, yet he also worked within its limits.

The Vienna of the late nineteenth century was a contradictory city. Although it was home to sophisticated, liberal ideas in its intellectual café society, and its art, music and literature, by the turn of the century Vienna was also a city with deep economic problems. Recent historians have pointed out that the Vienna bourgeoisie was overwhelmingly Jewish. Although Jews made up only 10 per cent of the population of Vienna, more than half of the doctors and lawyers in the city in 1890 were Jewish (Forrester 1997: 189). With cultural advantages came backlash. Anti-Semitism was also a part of life in Vienna. In his 'Autobiographical Study' Freud wrote of the consequence of encountering anti-Semitism in his career as a student: 'These first impressions at the University, however, had one consequence which was afterwards

to prove important; for at an early age I was made familiar with the fate of being in the Opposition ... The foundations were thus laid for a certain degree of independence of judgement' (Freud 1925a: 191). This sense of being in the opposition would stay with Freud for the rest of his life. In truth, there were, from the beginning, violent opponents of psychoanalytic ideas, but being in the opposition was also a stance that Freud relished: he enjoyed being the lone thinker, forging away at his revolutionary ideas without outside support. In fact Freud did not work entirely in isolation, and understanding the influences on him can help enhance our understanding of the scientific, historical and cultural ground from which psychoanalysis sprang.

As a boy Freud was intellectually precocious, learning many languages, including Greek, Latin, English, French and Hebrew. He began to read Shakespeare at the age of eight. He studied medicine at the University of Vienna from 1873 to 1881, although his initial interest was in zoological rather than human science. He claims in his 'Autobiographical Study': 'Neither at that time, nor indeed later in my career did I feel any particular predilection for the career of a doctor. I was moved, rather, by a sort of curiosity, which was, however, directed more towards human concerns than towards natural objects' (*Ibid.*: 190). From 1876 to 1882 he worked with the professor of physiology, Ernst Brücke (1819–1892) in Brücke's Physiological Institute. Brücke was a believer in mechanism, the principle that physical and chemical causes could explain all life processes without reference to religious or other vitalistic causes. Consciousness itself could be explained through biological processes. Following on the mid-century discoveries of evolutionary theory – that humans, like other species of animals, had evolved and changed – nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical thought had embraced the concept that all life could be explained through the experimental methods of science. Freud began, like Brücke, as a mechanist and a believer in physical causes for mental diseases, but he soon came to believe in a distinct role for psychology in mental life, a role apart from strictly biological causes. Yet Freud never gave up his determinist belief in the principles of cause and effect. His theories indicated that every hysterical symptom he examined, every dream, every slip of the tongue, everything we say or think on a daily basis, has a cause. It may not always be possible to uncover this cause, but it is there.

Research was Freud's primary interest early in his medical career.

He had no particular desire to practise medicine, but in 1882 he became engaged to Martha Bernays (1861–1951) and felt the economic pressures and responsibilities of a soon-to-be-married man planning on setting up a home and family. Practising medicine paid more than research, and Freud eventually moved from studying the spinal cords of fishes to studying the human central nervous system. He set up his own medical practice, specialising in the nervous diseases, as well as becoming a lecturer in neuropathology at the University of Vienna in 1885. Soon he began to treat the middle- and upper-middle-class women patients whose hysterical illnesses led him to develop the theory of psychoanalysis (see the next chapter, on Early Theories, for more on hysteria and these early patients).

Freud developed his radical ideas about nervous illness initially in *Studies on Hysteria*, a series of case histories he co-wrote with his colleague Joseph Breuer (1842–1925). He refined and changed the theory of psychoanalysis through the 1890s and published his first major psychoanalytic work *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. The book sold slowly at first. Eventually, however, Freud's ideas began to pick up followers even as they simultaneously encountered resistance and sometimes outrage. Freud devoted his life to expanding and refining his theories and to establishing psychoanalysis as an institution. His first books are primarily concerned with questions of interpretation – *The Interpretation of Dreams* with dream symbolism, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* with the meanings of jokes and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* with the meanings of slips of the tongue, mistakes, forgotten words, etc. Freud's innovative ideas and methods of interpretation will be discussed in Chapter 2. But Freud was also convinced of the importance of sexual life and early childhood development both to nervous illness, and to everyone's growth into troubled or untroubled adulthood. His *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* were published in 1905 and set the agenda for psychoanalysis's emphasis on sexual development, which is explored in detail in Chapter 3.

Freud drew the material for his theoretical works from his work with patients. His case histories – with their appealing nicknames, such as 'The Wolf Man', 'The Rat Man' and 'Little Hans' – often seem more like psychological thrillers than dry medical reports. They helped create a new genre of medical narrative, concerned not only with the story that the patient told about his or her own symptoms but with the

way the patient told that story. The major case histories are described in Chapter 4.

From the mid-1910s onwards Freud attempted to formulate his theory of the mind into a coherent plot or project – he postulated the categories of the ego, id, and super-ego to help explain the divisions he saw between different functions of the mind. (see pp. 82 and 48 for definitions of ego, id, and super-ego). Chapter 5 explores Freud's various mappings of the mind over his career.

Until his death in 1939 Freud continued writing on art, literature, war, death, fear, the methodology of psychoanalysis and the origins of culture, society and religion. Chapter 6 outlines Freud's major ideas about the structure of civilisation and society. He also wrote articles on specific works of art and artists (see 'The Moses of Michelangelo' and 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood') and on specific sexual pathologies (see 'Fetishism'). The influences that contributed to Freud's ideas were manifold. His theories were meant to explain all human psychology, but he formulated them in response to the historical times he lived in. For instance, after the devastating effects of World War I and the death of his favourite daughter Sophie he wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which he explored the possibility of a universal drive towards death. Freud collected antiquities and was fascinated by archaeology, which fed into articles such as 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*', a psychoanalytic reading of a short story about an archaeologist exploring the ruins of Pompeii. In the course of his writing career, Freud takes the basic principles of psychoanalysis and applies them to culture, literature, art and society. But what exactly are these basic principles? They can be traced by examining the ways in which Freud's early theories developed. In the next chapter I will return to Freud's initial encounter with hysteria in the 1890s, to trace the ways in which psychoanalysis evolved in response to the stories told by patients about their illnesses.

PSYCHOANALYSIS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL THEORY?

Before ending this introductory chapter I want to say something more about Freud's own autobiographical relationship to his theories, as well as his personal relationships to the men and women who became the first psychoanalysts. As Freud refined his ideas about the causes and

cures for mental illness in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, interest in his theories began to grow, and followers began to accrue to this new clinical and theoretical practice, psychoanalysis. Freud was always concerned about the status of psychoanalysis as a discipline; he wanted it to have the authority of a science, and he saw his concepts as reflecting essential truths about how the mind worked in dynamic relations with memory and sexual desire.

Freud's personal relations were intimately bound up with the development of the status of psychoanalysis. Amongst his colleagues there was a strict, if unwritten, code of loyalty to the specifics of Freud's concepts – Freud was the mastermind who was always the final authority on what was psychoanalytic and what was not. He himself analysed most of the first analysts, and they had close, admiring relations to him; they treated him as an intellectual and emotional father figure. Psychoanalysis is often described as a psychology that is in thrall to one particular mind: you will see I use the adjectives 'Freudian' and 'psychoanalytic' synonymously throughout this book. Psychoanalysis was a theory indebted to Freud's excavation of his own autobiography – the self-analysis he carries out in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud analysed himself, and then created a family tree of analysts by analysing his fellow doctors and friends, who went on to analyse others. But Freud is at the root of the tree – the father/source from which all other analysts spring.

Through his vexed relations with his friends and colleagues we can see acted out some of the recurring themes of Freud's own theories, especially (something we will come to in Chapter 3) his theory of the Oedipal desire that the (male) child wants to kill the father and take his place. In his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud discusses people who repeat the same patterns in all their relationships: 'Thus we have come across people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: such as the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his *protégés*, however much they may otherwise differ from one another, and thus seems doomed to taste all the bitterness of ingratitude; or the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend; or the man who time after time in the course of his life raises someone else into a position of great private or public authority and then, after a certain interval, himself upsets that authority and replaces him with a new one' (Freud 1920b: 292). In this passage Freud seems

to be describing his own repeated pattern. His closest and most influential intellectual friendships all ended in bitter disappointment for him, beginning with his professional collaborations with Joseph Breuer and Wilhelm Fliess (1858–1928), and continuing through what he saw as his (and psychoanalysis's) betrayal by C. G. Jung (1875–1961). His friendships with Breuer and Fliess broke down over a combination of intellectual and personal disagreements, and Freud was hurt by their discontinuance, especially that of his relationship with Fliess. Freud and his colleagues seem to act out his own theories – Freud lays down the psychoanalytic law, and the rebellious sons disobey it; they come up with ideas of their own that contradict his, and he kicks them out of the fold.

Breaking away from Freudian orthodoxy has been an aspect of psychoanalysis from its inception, and the debate about Freud continues with great vigour today. Psychoanalysis is a theory of intense emotions. In Freud's world of mental life one loves or hates, longs to be enveloped in womb-like comfort or feels murderous rage; one rarely feels passing interest or minor irritation. It seems appropriate that psychoanalysis has also always provoked intense emotional reactions in both its supporters and detractors. The extremes of emotion on which the theory relies have spilled over into the debates which rage about the relevance and importance of Freudian ideas today. Although psychoanalytic discoveries such as the significance of unconscious life, the re-emergence of repressed desires and the centrality of sexuality to our development as human beings have never been superseded, there has recently been a backlash against psychoanalysis as an effective cure for mental illness, and there has been a sustained critique of Freud's historical legacy. On the one hand, Prozac and other antidepressants have opened up a new sense that depression and other mental instabilities can be most effectively treated through drugs. On the other hand, critics of psychoanalysis have pointed out the shakiness of some of Freud's original methods and conclusions.

Both of these criticisms – about the new possibilities opened up by drug treatment for explaining and curing mental illnesses chemically, and about the uncertainty surrounding some of Freud's earliest case histories – contain elements of truth, but both are also part of a wider cultural backlash against Freud. (For some particularly virulent anti-Freudians, see the entries on Jeffrey Masson and Frederick Crews in Further Reading.) In the final chapter of this book I will return to this

question of the relevance of Freud today and argue that it would be a terrible mistake to discard our continued readings of Freud, whether we find ourselves reading with Freud or against him. Many of the conclusions of Freud's detractors are based on their own shaky assumptions. But even if these critiques were one hundred per cent true, Freudian concepts would continue to be relevant to any comprehensive understanding of our culture, history and literature, as well as for human mental and emotional life. The reaction against psychoanalysis is part and parcel of the central place Freudian notions have had in our visions of ourselves, our relations with others, and our relations as individuals to our social world.

As we shall see psychoanalysis is a theory that makes the personal and the theoretical difficult to disentangle. It provides a method for examining the hidden motives that drive even the most apparently objective undertakings, such as scientific endeavours. Psychoanalysis, like Marxism and Darwinism before it, is a theory of the world which casts a sceptical eye on the stories that have preceded it. It suspects stories that come too easily, and asks us to think twice about whether or not we believe that something is true. It is appropriate to turn that psychoanalytic scepticism back on Freud, and to think about his own motivations for constructing his theory, as we continue to explore the basic building blocks of psychoanalytic thought.

Copyright of Sigmund Freud (0415215218) is the property of Routledge. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.