

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism takes the techniques of psychoanalysis as initially developed by Sigmund Freud and applies them in an examination of literature.

For our purposes, analysis tends to be either about the author, the reader, the characters in the text, or the formal aspects of the work. For example, one can analyze a work to reveal the mind of the author, explore how a reader creates meaning, or explain the actions and motivations of characters in a work. Based on Lacan's famous dictum "the unconscious is structured like language," psychoanalytic critics also apply their techniques to examine the formal aspects of literature.

Below are some places to help you provide reference on psychoanalytic criticism. It is more of a starting point than an attempt at comprehensiveness.

Key terms: the self; the gaze; the Oedipus complex; desire; drives; projection; sublimation, fetish; uncanny; (return of) the repressed.

Key figures associated with psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud; Carl Jung; Jacques Lacan; Slavoj Zizek; Melanie Klein; Ernest Jones; Simon Lesser; Julia Kristeva

Library of Congress Subject Headings

Psychoanalysis and Literature
Psychoanalysis

MLA

Scholarly Approach – Psychoanalytic approach (3097 hits)

Selective Bibliography of Works

For quick reference

Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005.

When answering reference questions about psychoanalytic criticism, I point students first to the entry entitled "Psychological and Psychoanalytic Criticism" (p. 256-262). In five pages, Abrams provides an overview of this school of criticism without overwhelming the student (or at least it simplifies the concept enough for a student to get started).

Briganti, Chiara, et al. "Psychoanalytic Theory and Criticism." The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism. Eds. Michael Groden, Martin Kriswirth and Imre Szeman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. 777-87.

In three sections, entitled 1. Traditional Freudian Criticism; 2. Reconceptualizing Freud; 3. The Post-Lacanian. Combined, these sections provide a historical overview of psychoanalytic criticism, noting major players and movements within psychoanalysis. Each section ends with an excellent bibliography or primary texts.

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For lengthier explanations

Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995.

Contains a chapter on psychoanalytic criticism giving equal weight to Freud and Lacan. Also provides sample psychoanalytic literary analyses of works of fiction.

Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.

Devotes an entire chapter to Psychoanalysis (p. 151-193) and makes Freud and Lacan understandable to the uninitiated. The latter part of the chapter, beginning on p.179, shows how their works operate in psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Holland, Norman N. "The Mind and the Book: A Long Look at Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism." Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies 2.1 (2000): 13-23.

Concise summary of psychoanalytic literary criticism and some suggestions for its future applications.

For advanced readers

Freud, Sigmund. The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.

A good entry into the works and analysis of Freud.

Lacan, Jacques. Ecrits: A Selection. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.

Provides an introduction to the works of Lacan. Chapter one on the mirror stage and chapter five on the agency of the letter are good representatives of Lacan interpreting the oedipal stage and the relations of the unconscious to the ego.

Wright, Elizabeth. Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

Provides detailed analysis and examples of psychoanalysis and its effects on different schools of criticism. Contains chapters devoted to the works of Freud, Klein, Jung, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Zizek.

Zizek, Slavoj. Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

Zizek, an influential thinker in his own right, demonstrates how psychoanalysis can be used to gain insights into pop culture productions like Hitchcock films.

Electronic Resources & Bibliographies

Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishers. <http://www.p-e-p.org/index.htm>.

Contains the full text of 26 journals in psychoanalysis, 56 classic psychoanalytic books, and all 24 volumes of The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.

(Subscriber database, but searching for entries is free.)

Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory. <http://ywct.oxfordjournals.org/archive/>

This bibliography has a chapter dedicated to psychoanalysis. The essays introducing that year's work are usually eight to ten pages long and provide the researcher with information about the current scholarship in psychoanalytic criticism. (Subscriber database)