Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

The terms “psychological,” or “psychoanalytical,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text. According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:
- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.
- According to psychoanalytic theory, there are three parts to the subconscious, which is the largest part of the human personality. The three parts are:
  a) The id – the basic desire. The id is the fundamental root of what each person wants. There is no sense of conscience in it, thus making it everyone’s “inner child.” Children, before they are taught social skills, operate entirely through the id. They cry in public, wet their diapers, and demand immediate gratification of their needs and desires, to name just a few things.
  b) The superego – the opposite of the id. This is the repository of all socially imposed behavior and sense of guilt. While the id is innate, the superego is learned through parental instruction and living in society. Humans develop a superego by having parents scold them and other members of society criticize or teach them.
  c) The ego – reality. The balance between the id and the superego. The ego takes the desires of the id and filters them through the rule base in the superego and comes up with an action that satisfies both entities. The ego realizes that the id must be satisfied, but that there are certain socially acceptable ways to go about satisfying it.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the second view:
According to the second view, an essential relationship exists between the author of the work and the work itself. This view is in direct contrast to the Formalist approach to literature. In order to understand a work, one must fully understand the author’s life and emotional stance, and vice versa. Though a work might not be blatantly autobiographical, psychoanalysts argue that there is always something of the author in the work, whether it is a character, character trait, theme, or motif. Often, authors will satirize people they dislike or will be overtly sympathetic to people they do like. This author bias often has an effect on the reader, which is exactly what the author wants. When reading, people are very vulnerable to the author’s chosen point of view (the only way they hear the story is through the author’s narrator). This view of the psychoanalytic view is a very subjective and controversial approach to literature, but the psychoanalysts of the world argue it is a valid and important type of literary study.

This type of psychoanalytic reading includes the following:
1. Reference to what is known or surmised about the author’s personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work. For example, Charles Dickens grew up poor and later wrote books very sympathetic to boys who grew up poor.
2. Reference to a literary work is made in order to establish an understanding of the mind of the author. For example, judging by Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*, one might reasonably conclude that Harper Lee herself was sympathetic to the plight of black Americans.

3. Studying the literary work of an author is a means of knowing the author as a person. The more novels by Charles Dickens one reads, the clearer idea one can infer about the author’s beliefs, values, hopes, fears, etc.

4. An artist may put his or her repressed desires on the page in the form of actions performed by characters. Pay attention to behaviors that are not socially “normal” to see if there is any evidence of the id at work. For example, an author who consistently writes stories in which his female characters are weak, dependent, or unintelligent might be expressing latent misogynist tendencies.

Essential Questions for A Psychoanalytic Reading
1. What are the traits of the main character?
2. How does the author reveal those traits?
3. What do you learn about the character through the narrator?
4. What do you learn about the character from the way other characters relate to him or her?
5. What do you infer about the character from his/her thoughts, actions, and speech?
6. What discrepancies exist between the author’s portrayal of the character and how other characters react to him or her?
7. What discrepancies exist between the author’s portrayal of the character and the reader’s inferences?
8. Is the main character a dynamic character (does he or she change throughout the course of the story)? If so, how and why?
9. How does the character view him or herself?
10. What discrepancies exist between a character’s view of him or herself and other characters’ reactions, the author’s portrayal, and/or reader inference?
11. How do the characters view one another?
12. Is there any discrepancy between a character’s personal opinion of himself and how others think about him?
13. What types of relationships exist in the work?
14. What types of images are used in conjunction with the character? What do they symbolize?
15. What symbols are used in the course of the story? What do they symbolize?
16. Do any characters have dreams or inner monologues? What is revealed about a character through dreams that would not otherwise be revealed?
17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?
18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?