**Psychological Approaches**

The foundation of psychological criticism is Dr. Sigmund Freud’s premise that the mind has both a conscious and unconscious realm. Psychology most often explores the unconscious mind, which uses isolation, intellectualization, repression, projection, displacement, denial, and/or reaction formations to disguise the thoughts and emotions that the conscious mind refuses to accept. Isolation occurs when one acknowledges an incident but does not confront its significance. When a person attempts to rationalize a situation rather than emotionally experience it, he or she is intellectualizing. Repression is like selective hearing for the mind; to repress a thought or occurrence is to deny its existence. An individual is engaging in projection when he or she sees a trait in others not because it is necessarily present, but because it is present in the individual. Displacement involves targeting someone less dangerous or powerful than the person one really wishes to oppose. Denial is the blatant refusal to accept that a situation or thought is undesirable, and reaction formation occurs when one denies the inconvenient and insists that all is well. Knowledge of these and other psychological terms aids the critic in locating the hidden desires of the author, his or her characters, and his or her readers.

Many critics and psychologists have used Freud’s work as a jumping-off point, further developing his assumptions in order to construct their own theories. Otto Rank used the idea of the Oedipal complex to explain similarities among literary heroes. Alfred Adler introduced the idea of an “inferiority complex,” and Carl Jung believed in the existence of a “collective unconscious,” the universal repression of common desires that threaten the stability of our society. Robert Rogers theorizes that within each person there are “multiple selves.” Rogers holds that while one self may be dominant, other selves might surface in one’s writing. Some psychoanalytic critics, such as Norman Holland, focus on the reader’s response to the text rather than the author. Holland states that the reader’s interpretations are more revealing than the author’s motives: “While not denying the idea that the unconscious plays a role in creativity, psychoanalytic critics such as Holland began to focus more on the ways in which authors create works that appeal to our repressed wishes and fantasies” (Schwarz 91). His theory connects psychological criticism with reader response criticism. Jacques Lacan believes in a concrete connection between the world of dreams and the world of literature; neither is real, he says, but both help to reveal the thoughts and desires of the unconscious: “[Lacan] treats the unconscious as a language and, consequently, views the dream not as Freud did (that is, as a form and symptom of repression) but rather as a form of discourse” (Schwarz 92). Lacan connects the development of an Oedipal complex with the development of language skills. He also believes that a society’s language defines its gender roles, a theory which is often acceptable to feminist readers, because it explains how women may feel inferior to men without claiming that they all experience “penis envy.”

Psychological criticism assumes that every literary work contains two basic layers of meaning. The most obvious part of any work is the surface layer, or the “manifest content.” This exterior provides a context for the “dream thought,” where the secrets of the author and his or her characters are hidden. Psychological critics attempt to discover which repressed desires and emotions are represented in the dream thought. There are two ways to represent repressed desires and emotions: condensation and displacement. In condensation, one thought or event is representative of multiple thoughts or events, and in displacement, a desire is represented by some other emotion or event that is only loosely connected to the original. Metaphors are one form of displacement.

Readers of Toni Morrison’s acclaimed novel Beloved may use psychoanalysis to better understand the thoughts and actions of her characters, many of which could be considered deeply psychologically disturbed. If they choose to follow in the tradition of Holland, they may examine their own psychological responses to the novel. They may also theorize on Morrison’s psychological state during the writing process: was she repressing some wish or fear in writing Beloved? Regardless of the reader’s strategy, examining Beloved through a psychological lens will undoubtedly shed some amount of light on the complicated relationships and philosophical nature of the novel.

Works Cited

Schwarz, Daniel R. “Psychoanalytic Criticism and ‘The Dead.’” in The Dead. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1994. 85-102.

1. Briefly paraphrase each of the paragraphs.
2. What is your reaction to Norman Holland’s focus on psychoanalytical theory? Do you agree with the concept of reader response?
3. How can Lacan’s approach be seen in the early development of the novel Beloved?
4. Is the concept of the “dream thought” similar or different from Sethe’s rememory? Please explain with specific details.