

3

Psychoanalytic Criticism



❖ THE UNCONSCIOUS

Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of applied psychoanalysis, a science concerned with the interaction between conscious and unconscious processes and with the laws of mental functioning. It should not be confused with psychotherapy, which is concerned with treating mental illness and behavioral problems, although many psychotherapists use various kinds of analysis in their work. Rather, psychoanalytic criticism is one of many different forms of study that use psychoanalytic concepts to understand particular subject matter. Thus there are psychoanalytically inclined sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, as well as critics, and all of them use concepts and insights from psychoanalytic theory in their work.

Freud did not discover the unconscious; Plato, Nietzsche, Bergson, and many others discussed it before Freud. However, Freud developed the concept most thoroughly, and it is with Freud that all neo-Freudians, post-Freudians, anti-Freudians, and non-Freudians must come to grips. He was a seminal thinker of incredible power and scope, and his ideas and insights have fueled the work of generations of scholars in numerous fields. What I offer in this section is not a full-scale explication of Freudian thought, but a selection of some of Freud's most important concepts—concepts that can be applied to the media

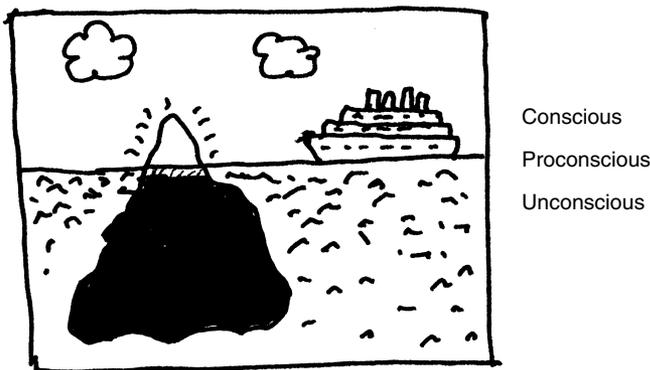
to help clarify how they work and how they affect us. Freud was most interested in helping people, but in the course of his amazing career he wrote on many other subjects, such as folklore, humor, and theater—pointing the way toward the development of psychoanalytic criticism.

One of the keystones in psychoanalytic theory is the concept of the unconscious. As Freud writes in his essay “Psychoanalysis” (1963):

It was a triumph for the interpretative art of psychoanalysis when it succeeded in demonstrating that certain common mental acts of normal people, for which no one had hitherto attempted to put forward a psychological explanation, were to be regarded in the same light as the symptoms of neurotics: that is to say they had a *meaning*, which was unknown to the subject but which could easily be discovered by analytic means. . . . A class of material was brought to light which is calculated better than any other to stimulate a belief in the existence of unconscious mental acts even in people to whom the hypothesis of something at once mental and unconscious seems strange and even absurd. (pp. 235–236)

We are not, then, aware of everything that is going on in our minds. Not only that, we are aware of only a little that is going on in our minds—only a small portion of our mental lives is accessible to us.

Figure 3.1



It has frequently been suggested that an individual’s mental life can be represented by an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg, that part seen

above the water, is what the person is conscious of. The remainder of the iceberg, by far the greater part of it, lies hidden beneath the water. Although it is not seen, it is still there. "What is in your mind," Freud (1963) notes, "is not identical with what you are conscious of; whether something is going on in your mind and whether you hear of it, are two different things" (p. 189).

This means that we are not in complete control of ourselves all the time, we are affected by events and circumstances in ways we cannot fathom, and we do things for reasons we do not understand or will not admit to ourselves. In short, we are not completely rational creatures who act only on the basis of logic and intelligence, but instead are vulnerable to emotional and other kinds of nonrational or irrational appeals.

But why, you may ask, don't we become conscious of all that is going on in our minds? Why does all this material elude us? Why do our minds play such tricks on us? Freud offers an explanation that is both obvious (once it is pointed out) and ingenious: We *repress* this material because we do not want, for a variety of reasons, to become conscious of it. It would cause us pain or guilt or some other unpleasant feeling. Thus we create a barrier between our consciousness and our unconscious and do not allow repressed material to pass through that barrier.

Ernest Dichter is one of the founding fathers of the field known as motivation research. The goal of motivation research is to discover the unconscious or, it is assumed, real reasons that people do things, so that organizations, manufacturers, and so on can better shape people's behavior—that is, get them to buy particular products or do whatever else is asked of them. In his book *The Strategy of Desire* (1960), Dichter writes:

Whatever your attitude toward modern psychology or psychoanalysis, it has been proved beyond any doubt that many of our daily decisions are governed by motivations over which we have no control and of which we are often quite unaware. (p. 12)

Dichter and other motivation researchers, then, "mine" the unconscious and put it to work, so to speak.

Dichter (1964) offers an example of the way in which unconscious desires and forces operate in a discussion of cigarette lighters:

The reliability of a lighter is important because it is integrally connected with the basic [read "unconscious"] reason for using a lighter. (p. 341)

Let me interrupt here to ask what you think this “basic reason” might be. The answer most people would give would be “That’s obvious—to light cigarettes.” But that is the conscious, or “manifest,” reason. The basic, or “real,” reason and the “latent” and unconscious reason are sometimes entirely different.

Let us return to Dichter, who tells us why people use lighters:

The basic reason for using a lighter [is] . . . the desire for mastery and power. The capacity to summon fire inevitably gives every human being, child or grownup, a sense of power. Reasons go far back into man’s history. Fire and the ability to command it are prized because they are associated not only with warmth, but also with life itself. As attested to by the Greek legend of Prometheus and many other myths, the ability to control fire is an age-old symbol of man’s conquest of the physical world he inhabits.

A cigarette lighter provides conspicuous evidence of this ability to summon fire. The ease and speed with which the lighter works enhances the feeling of power. The failure of a lighter to work does not just create superficial social embarrassment, it frustrates a deep-seated desire for a feeling of mastery and control. (p. 341)

Thus cigarette lighters are important to people because lighters fulfill powerful but unconscious needs and desires. The same can be said of many of the films we see, television programs we watch, novels we read, and other art forms we find so necessary to our lives. All of these things feed our unconscious lives, our psyches, in ways that few people understand.

But the need for mastery and power is only part of the story, for at a deeper level there is something else connected with the humble cigarette lighter. Dichter explains:

Research evidence suggests that at a still deeper level the need for certainty that a cigarette lighter will work matters as much as it does because it is also bound up with the idea of sexual potency. The working of the lighter becomes a kind of symbol of the flame which must be lit in consummating sexual union. (p. 341)

This leads us to our next important subject—sexuality. Many people are aware that Freud was interested in sexuality, but they may

know little more than that. And often the little knowledge they have of Freud's views is simplistic, which leads to absurd misconceptions.

❖ SEXUALITY

Many people are negative or even hostile toward Freud's work because of his views on sexuality. I believe, however, that much of this hostility is based in misunderstanding of Freud's theories and also that it is related, in the United States at least, to extreme sensitivity to the topic of sexuality. We Americans resist intrusion into this most private and personal aspect of our lives and may even repress—refuse to admit to consciousness—ideas and insights that would explain sexuality in general and our behavior in particular.

Freud calls the "force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind" the *libido*. This term should be understood broadly, and not as being restricted only to sexual relations; that is, *libido* refers to various kinds of sensual pleasures and gratifications. According to Freud, all individuals pass through four stages in their development: the oral, the anal, the phallic, and the genital. In *The Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis* these stages are described as follows:

The mouth represents an erotogenic zone for the infant. Sucking and later eating represent the gratification of oral needs. The fact that the infant often sucks a pacifier indicates that he is not only concerned with the incorporation of calories. When the infant begins to have teeth, the need to bite expresses his sadistic desires. The second stage of development is usually referred to as the sadistic-anal, and is characterized by the infant's interest in excreting or retaining his stools. Finally, the third stage is referred to as the phallic, in which the boy is interested in his penis and the girl in her clitoris. The boy's interest in his penis appears to be responsible for his positive Oedipus complex, which is finally dissolved by the fear of castration. The girl reacts with penis envy, if she considers her clitoris to be an inferior organ to the penis.

Freud pointed out that the stages are not clear-cut, and that the fourth stage, the genital phase, is achieved only with puberty. (Eidelberg, 1968, pp. 210–211)

During infancy and childhood, an individual's sexual life is rich but dissociated and unfocused. Focusing occurs at puberty.

One of the difficulties in explaining psychoanalytic theory is that one seems to have to know everything at the same time. In the above quotation, for example, a number of concepts are mentioned that might need a bit of amplification, such as the matter of anality, the Oedipus complex, and the related concepts of castration anxiety and penis envy. These concepts are difficult for many people to accept and often strike those who are unfamiliar with Freud and psychoanalytic thought as fantastic and farfetched. Perhaps it is most useful to think of all of the above-named as concepts that Freud developed to explain the phenomena and behaviors he encountered in his work. He describes psychoanalysis as "always incomplete and always ready to correct or modify its theories" (1963, p. 251).

Let us start with the matter of anal behavior, or what Freud calls "anal eroticism" in a fascinating paper titled "Character and Anal Eroticism." Freud connects a combination of personality traits that have developed to an extreme degree—orderliness, parsimoniousness, and obstinacy—with people who have had problems overcoming their anal stage and who may use these personality traits as a means of dealing with this fact. What is most fascinating is that there are "connections which exist between the two complexes of interest in money and of defecation, which seem so dissimilar," that are, or appear to be, "most far-reaching." Freud (1963) writes:

In reality, wherever archaic modes of thought predominate or have persisted—in ancient civilizations, in myth, fairy-tale and superstition, in unconscious thoughts and dreams, and in the neuroses—money comes into the closest relation with excrement. We know how the money which the devil gives his paramours turns to excrement after his departure, and the devil is most certainly nothing more than a personification of the unconscious instinctual forces. (p. 31)

Ultimately there is an identification of gold with feces, "the most precious substance known to man and the most worthless" (p. 32).

❖ THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

The Oedipus complex represents the core of neurosis for Freud; it is a concept that explains a great deal. In a famous letter that Freud wrote

on October 15, 1897, to Wilhelm Fliess, he described how he came to recognize the existence and importance of the Oedipus complex:

Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise. Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomena of early childhood, even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have been made hysterics. . . . If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dramas were such failures. Our feelings rise against any arbitrary individual fate . . . but the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state.

The idea has passed through my head that the same thing may lie at the root of *Hamlet*. I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intentions, but supposing rather that he was impelled to write it by a real event because his own unconscious understood that of his hero. How can one explain the hysteric Hamlet's phrase "So conscience doth make cowards of us all," and his hesitation to avenge his father by killing his uncle, when he himself so casually sends his courtiers to their death and despatches Laertes so quickly? How better than by the torment roused in him by the obscure memory that he himself had meditated the same deed against his father because of passion for his mother—"use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping?" His conscience is his unconscious feeling of guilt. (quoted in Grotjahn, 1966, pp. 84-85)

According to psychoanalytic theory, every individual passes through a stage in which he or she desires the parent of the opposite sex—all of this, of course, on an unconscious level. Most people learn to master their Oedipus complexes; neurotic individuals are plagued by theirs. In little boys this mastery is aided by an unconscious fear of castration—castration anxiety—and in little girls it is aided by jealousy of men and what is termed penis envy.

Little boys, according to Freudian theory, sexualize their love for their mothers and wish to displace their fathers and monopolize their mothers' affection. Their fear of retaliation by their fathers then leads them to renounce their love of their mothers, to identify with the masculinity of their fathers, to rechannel their love outside of the family, and to direct their interest toward other females.

With little girls, the situation is different. They do not have to fear castration (some theorists suggest that they believe they have already lost their penises) and so do not relinquish their Oedipal desires as quickly as boys do. But girls do fear the loss of the love of both their parents, and so avoid this loss by reidentifying with their mothers and turning, eventually, to males other than their fathers as a means of obtaining babies (and, indirectly, their lost penises).

Freud also wrote about several other related complexes that are of interest here. For example, the *Heracles complex* is characterized by a hatred of the father for his children. The father sees the children as rivals for the affection of his wife, and so wishes to get rid of the children. The *Jocasta complex* (named for the mother of Oedipus) is characterized by abnormal attachment of the mother to her son; it is found in varying degrees of intensity, from simple overattachment to incestuous relations.

One of the ways in which young children deal with their Oedipal anxieties is through exposure to fairy tales. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1977), Bruno Bettelheim devotes a chapter to Oedipal conflicts and resolutions in which he argues that fairy tales can help children to resolve these problems. Children identify with the heroes and heroines of such stories and learn important things about life as well. Fairy tales, Bettelheim suggests, speak to children indirectly and symbolically—the stories are often about some unlikely hero who “proves himself by slaying dragons, solving riddles, and living by his wits and goodness until eventually he frees the beautiful princess, marries her, and lives happily ever after” (p. 111). In stories that speak to little girls, there is usually some evil stepmother or enchantress who is intensely jealous of the heroine and tries to prevent some hero, such as Prince Charming, from finding his princess. Sometimes in these tales the mother is split into two characters—an evil stepmother and a good mother (or fairy godmother).

Fairy tales are important because they help children cope with the psychological difficulties they experience. As Bettelheim (1977) explains:

Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings—came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult. Applying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, preconscious and unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time. By dealing with universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy the child's mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures. As the stories unfold, they give conscious credence and body to id pressures and show ways to satisfy these that are in line with ego and superego requirements. (pp. 5–6)

Fairy tales, as well as other texts that are very much life fairy tales (and may be, in truth, modernized fairy tales), have important functions as far as our psyches are concerned.

I cannot resist pointing out in passing that the relationship between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in *Star Wars* is (we eventually discover) an Oedipal one. *Star Wars* is, to a great degree, a modernized fairy tale about a princess in distress and a young man who rescues her. There are many other kinds of elements in the film as well—Germanic villains and World War II airplane battles, for example—but the core of the film is, I would suggest, a fairy tale.

We must keep in mind that all of the phenomena discussed in this section operate beyond our consciousness and are kept buried through our power to resist and repress things that would disturb us. We empathize with Hamlet and with countless other heroes and heroines because, unconsciously, we recognize that their battles are our battles and their difficulties are our difficulties.

❖ ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MYTH

The Oedipus complex, as Freud pointed out, is named after a mythological hero. The fact that Freud named this complex after a mythical figure suggests the important role that myths play in our consciousness and in our lives.

The story of Oedipus begins with the marriage of King Laius of Thebes to his distant cousin, Jocasta. An oracle makes a prophecy that Laius will be killed by his son, so when Jocasta gives birth to Oedipus, Laius binds the infant's feet and orders that he be left on a mountain-top to die. Laius is unaware that Oedipus is rescued from the mountain by a shepherd and taken to King Polybus of Corinth, who raises him as a son. Oedipus believes that Polybus is his father, so when, as a young man, he hears that Apollo has said that Oedipus is fated to kill his father, he leaves Corinth to avoid harming Polybus. As he travels to Thebes, he meets Laius at a crossroads; the two men get into a fight, and Laius is killed. Oedipus then goes on to Thebes, which is being plagued by the Sphinx, a monster that looks like a winged lion and has the face of a woman. The Sphinx devours any wayfarer who cannot answer this riddle: What creature goes on four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?

Oedipus seeks out the Sphinx and correctly answers the riddle she poses: The creature is man, who crawls in infancy, walks on two legs in the prime of life, and uses a cane to walk in old age. When Oedipus answers the riddle, the Sphinx kills herself and Thebes is saved. Oedipus is then welcomed into the city with great fanfare, and the Thebans make him their king. He marries the wife of the former king, Jocasta—not realizing that she is his mother—and they have two children. When the children are grown up, Thebes is visited by another plague. Oedipus sends Jocasta's brother, Creon, to consult the oracle at Delphi to find out what might be done to lift the plague. Creon comes back with the answer: Whoever murdered King Laius must be punished. Oedipus then sends Tiresias, a blind prophet (who had once been a woman), to the oracle to find out the name of the king's murderer. When Tiresias returns, he at first refuses to tell Oedipus what he has learned. When Oedipus accuses Tiresias of not telling him the answer because Tiresias himself was involved in the killing of King Laius, Tiresias finally tells Oedipus, "You are the murderer." When it becomes clear that Oedipus has killed his own father and married his mother, Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus blinds himself in his grief.

This myth, Freud suggests, is a template that explains the developmental processes that all children undergo. The child is attracted to the parent of the opposite sex and becomes hostile toward the parent of the same sex. Most children are able to resolve their Oedipal difficulties and lead normal lives, but those who can't end up with many psychological difficulties. For Freud, Oedipal conflicts are the core of neuroses.

Freud's argument is that myths have impacts on our psychological development. Another aspect of myths that is worth considering is that these sacred stories shape many of the things we do, although we are unaware of this influence. As Mircea Eliade explains in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957/1961), "The modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals" (pp. 204–205). Thus many films and television programs and many of our rituals, such as holding New Year's Eve parties, include sacred or mythological content. Myths are an important component of our psyches, our media and popular culture, and our everyday lives.

❖ ID, EGO, AND SUPEREGO

The id, ego, and superego are part of what is usually referred to as Freud's *structural* hypothesis about mental functioning. Charles Brenner (1974) offers the following brief description of these three phenomena:

We may say that id comprises the psychic representatives of the drives, the ego consists of those functions which have to do with the individual's relation to his environment, and the superego comprises the moral precepts of our minds as well as our ideal aspirations.

The drives, of course, we assume to be present from birth, but the same is certainly not true of interest in or control of the environment on the one hand, nor of any moral sense or aspirations on the other. It is obvious that neither of the latter, that is neither the ego nor the superego, develops till sometimes after birth.

Freud expressed this fact by assuming that the id comprised the entire psychic apparatus at birth, and that the ego and superego were originally parts of the id which differentiated sufficiently in the course of growth to warrant their being considered as separate functional entities. (p. 38)

Each of these entities—the id, ego, and superego—is extremely complicated, and Freud and others have written a great deal about how each develops and functions, and the importance of each to the individual's psychic life.

Freud's structural hypothesis superseded his earlier theory of mental functioning, known as the *topographic*, which divided the psyche into three systems: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. (I have dealt with these notions already, although I left out the preconscious in order to simplify matters.) In essence, according to the structural hypothesis, the psyche is in constant struggle, as the id and superego war against one another. The poor ego tries to mediate between the two—between the desire for pleasure and the fear of punishment, between the drives and the conscience.

Freud's description of the id in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* is most graphic:

We can come nearer to the id with images, and call it chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement. We suppose that it is somewhere in direct contact with somatic processes, and takes over from them instinctual needs and gives them mental expression, but we cannot say in what substratum this contact is made. These instincts fill it with energy, but it has no organization and no unified will, only an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure-principle. (quoted in Hinsie & Campbell, 1970, p. 372)

This bubbling cauldron of sexual desire, passion, and lust must not be allowed to determine an individual's actions because we live in societies, and civilization demands that we control our behavior. In fact, the demands that civilization makes on us are so great, according to Freud (1962), that we suffer from great psychological pain.

The superego corresponds, as Brenner (1974) notes, "in a general way to what we ordinarily call conscience. It comprises the moral functions of the personality." He lists the functions of the superego:

1. the approval or disapproval of actions and wishes on the grounds of rectitude.
 2. critical self-observation.
 3. self-punishment.
 4. the demand for reparation or repentance of wrong-doing.
 5. self-praise or self-love as a reward for virtuous or desirable thoughts and actions.
- Contrary to the ordinary meaning of "conscience," however, we understand that the functions of the superego are often largely or completely unconscious. (pp. 111–112)

The superego assumes, then, a position in opposition to the id. In between these two polarities, the ego tries to mediate, operating always

with the aim of self-preservation. The ego carries out its function by storing up experiences in the memory, avoiding excessively strong stimuli through flight, adapting to moderately strong stimuli, and bringing about changes in the world through activity.

We can use the concepts of the id, ego, and superego to help us understand texts. In certain texts, characters may be seen as primarily id figures or ego figures or superego figures. For example, in *Star Trek*, I would suggest that Spock is, essentially, an ego figure, Kirk (in German, interestingly, the name means "church") is a superego figure, and McCoy is an id figure. Spock, the emotionless Vulcan, represents pure rationality. Kirk, the commander of the *Enterprise*, more or less determines what is to be done, and so represents the superego. And McCoy, who is very emotional and often operates on the basis of his feelings, represents the id.

In some texts it is easy to identify characters as id, ego, or superego figures. Superman, Dick Tracy, Luke Skywalker, and countless other heroes and heroines and caped crusaders are obviously superego figures. But others, such as James Bond and Indiana Jones, are more complicated; they may be more id and ego figures, perhaps, than superego ones. Villains, of course, are almost always id figures; they lack superego development and are interested only in gratifying their desires. They may be intelligent and shrewd, but they lack a sense of right and wrong.

We can also examine various genres in terms of the Freudian structural hypothesis. Certain kinds of films and television programs, such as news shows, interview programs, and documentaries, can be classified as essentially ego texts. Texts that feature the police or that have religious messages are obviously superego texts. And soap operas and other television programs and films that involve sexuality (video pornography, MTV) tend to be id texts. It is not always possible to label a text as clearly representing id, ego, or superego, but in some cases, especially when the work is a formulaic one, it does make sense.

❖ SYMBOLS

Psychoanalysis is, remember, an interpretive art. It seeks to find meaning in the behavior of people and in the arts they create. One way we can apply psychoanalytic theory is by understanding how the psyche works and learning how to interpret the hidden significance of what people and characters in fiction do. We ask ourselves questions, such

as, "What does it mean when Hamlet says this or that?" or "What does it mean when Hamlet is unable to act?" We want to know *why*.

This is where symbols come in. Symbols are things that stand for other things, many of which are hidden or at least not obvious. A symbol can stand for an institution, a mode of thought, an idea, a wish—any number of things. Heroes and heroines are often symbolic and thus can be interpreted in terms of all the things they stand for. And much of what is most interesting about symbols is their relation to the unconscious. Symbols are keys that enable us to unlock the doors shielding our unconscious feelings and beliefs from scrutiny. Symbols are messages from our unconscious.

Hinsie and Campbell (1970) define symbolism as follows:

The act or process of representing an order or idea by a substitute object, sign, or signal. In psychiatry, symbolism is of particular importance since it can serve as a defense mechanism of the ego, as where unconscious (and forbidden) aggressive or sexual impulses come to expression through symbolic representation and thus are able to avoid censorship. (p. 734)

According to this theory, then, we mask our unconscious sexual and aggressive desires through symbolization, which enables us to escape guilt from the superego.

Interpreting symbols can involve a number of difficulties. (I might point out that there are many different theories in psychology about symbols, and they have, like many other aspects of psychoanalytic thought, generated a great deal of controversy.) First, symbols are often ambivalent and can be explained in varying ways depending on one's orientation. For instance, some people see Hamlet's inability to act as symbolic of the power of an unresolved Oedipus complex, whereas others believe that it symbolizes his skepticism and overintellectualism. Some think that Hamlet is paralyzed by grief; others think he is insane. (If you are interested in the "problem" of Hamlet, I recommend that you read *Hamlet and Oedipus*, by Ernest Jones [1949]. Jones provides a fascinating, although doctrinaire Freudian, interpretation of this symbolic hero.)

Symbols may be classified as conventional, accidental, or universal. *Conventional* symbols are words that we learn that stand for things. In contrast to these are *accidental* symbols, which are personal, private, and connected to an individual's life history. For example, for a man who fell in love for the first time in Paris, Paris may become an

accidental symbol for love. (The accidental symbols found in dreams are what make the interpretation of dreams so complicated, although dreams contain more than accidental symbols.) Finally, *universal* symbols are those that are rooted in the experience of all people. Many of these are connected to our bodies and to natural processes. Attempting to understand symbols is often complicated by the fact that the logic behind symbolization is frequently not the same logic that people use in their everyday reasoning processes.

A broad comparison can be drawn between dreams and the works carried by the mass media. For a long time, neither were considered very important; neither dreams nor the texts of the media were thought to have any effects on us, and so neither attracted much serious attention. Now we know better. Dreams tend to be visual, so they are best compared to such media as film, television, and the comics. And just as dreams can be interpreted through analysis of their symbolic content, so can the mediated dreams that we find in the cinema or on the television screen. In both cases we ask the same questions: What is going on? What disguises are there? What gratifications do we get? What do the various symbolic heroes and heroines tell us about ourselves and our societies?

❖ DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Defense mechanisms are the various techniques the ego employs to control instincts and ward off anxieties. All of us make use of these mechanisms from time to time, although we are seldom conscious of doing so. In like manner, much of what the media bring us involves human beings in varying kinds of relationships, so many of the characters we see or read about can be interpreted (often) in terms of their defense mechanisms. That is, their behavior may make more sense to us if we can relate it to the defenses people use to maintain their equilibrium. We can also understand our fascination with mass media in terms of defense mechanisms.

Following is a list of some of the most important defense mechanisms, with a brief description of each:

- *Ambivalence*: A simultaneous feeling of love and hate or attraction and repulsion toward the same person or object. Sometimes these feelings alternate in rapid succession in people who wish to be able to gratify contradictory wishes.

- *Avoidance*: Refusal to become involved with subjects that are distressing because they are connected to unconscious sexual or aggressive impulses.
- *Denial or disavowal*: Refusal to accept the reality of something that generates anxiety by blocking it from consciousness or by becoming involved in a wish-fulfilling fantasy.
- *Fixation*: Obsessive preoccupation or attachment to something, generally the result of some traumatic experience.
- *Identification*: The desire to become “like” someone or something in some aspect of thought or behavior.
- *Projection*: An attempt to deny some negative or hostile feeling in oneself by attributing it to someone else. Thus a person who hates someone will “project” that hatred onto another, perceiving that person as being the one who hates.
- *Rationalization*: The offering of logical reasons or excuses for behavior generated by unconscious and irrational determinants. (This term was introduced into psychoanalysis by Ernest Jones.)
- *Reaction formation*: This occurs when a pair of ambivalent attitudes generates problems, so one element is suppressed and kept unconscious by overemphasis on the other (its opposite), although it doesn’t disappear. For example, a person might have ambivalent feelings of love and hatred toward another; the hate may be made unconscious and kept unconscious by an overemphasis on love, so that it appears to be replaced by love.
- *Regression*: The individual’s return to an earlier stage in life development when confronted with a stressful or anxiety-provoking situation.
- *Repression*: The barring from consciousness of unconscious instinctual wishes, memories, desires, and the like. This is considered the most basic defense mechanism.
- *Suppression*: The purposeful putting out of the mind and consciousness something that the individual finds painful. This is the second most basic defense mechanism. (Because suppression is voluntary, suppressed material can be recalled to consciousness fairly easily, unlike repressed material, which is very difficult to bring to consciousness.)

Let me suggest how a media analyst might apply knowledge of defense mechanisms by presenting an example involving regression. In an analysis that I conducted some years ago, I contrasted Pac-Man with

other video games that preceded it, such as *Space Invaders*. For more than a year, *Pac-Man* was the most popular video game in the United States, which is one of the reasons I analyzed it.

In *Space Invaders*, players fly through the open skies, zapping invading aliens. Two things about *Space Invaders* are important to this analysis: First, there is freedom to fly about; second, the game is phallic. In *Pac-Man*, on the other hand, the play is restricted to an enclosed area, and the "attacks" involve eating. In other words, aggression in *Pac-Man* is oral. What we have in *Pac-Man*, then, is a regression from the phallic (guns) to the oral (biting) as a means of fighting and a change from the freedom to race around the skies to confinement in a maze. From a developmental perspective, *Pac-Man* is regressive.

The significance of this regression raises interesting questions. When it is not pathological, regression often involves an attempt to escape from anxiety of some kind and is a perfectly normal kind of behavior that functions "in the service of the ego." It may be that the popularity of *Pac-Man* suggested that, somehow, large numbers of American young people (although they were not the only ones playing it) were experiencing anxieties and that they were using to game to assuage those anxieties. Curiously, there is often a connection between regression and fixation, so the fact that so many people played the game over and over again should not be too surprising.

Regression and all of the other defense mechanisms listed above are concepts that can be applied to the behavior of characters in films, television programs, and other texts and to various other aspects of the media. These concepts can help us to understand human motivation and can enrich and deepen our ability to analyze the media.

Defense mechanisms are functions of the ego, which uses them against the id. When the id threatens the ego, generating anxiety, the ego uses whatever it can to neutralize the id. There is a considerable amount of disagreement among psychoanalysts as to what can legitimately be called defense mechanisms (the ego also has other techniques for mastering the id), but the ones listed above are generally accepted as the most important.

❖ DREAMS

It is possible, without stretching things too much, to make a comparison between dreams and many of the fictions brought to us by the

media—especially the moving-image media, such as film and television. Dreams are like films and television productions in that they are made up of images, generally have a narrative structure (although it may be obscure and bizarre), and are frequently hard to fathom. According to Erich Fromm (1957):

Dreams are understood to be the hallucinatory fulfillment of irrational wishes and particularly sexual wishes which have originated in our early childhood and have not been fully transformed into reaction formations or sublimations. These wishes are expressed as being fulfilled when our conscious control is weakened, as is the case in sleep. (p. 67)

The situation is complicated by the fact that we don't allow ourselves to dream about certain things, which implies that some kind of a censoring agent is at work that prevents certain forbidden thoughts to appear undisguised. This is where symbols (which I've already discussed) come in—they allow us to sneak "forbidden" material past our internal censors. Most of these symbols are sexual, as Fromm points out:

The male genital is symbolized by sticks, trees, umbrellas, knives, pencils, hammers, airplanes, and many other objects which represent it either by their shape or by their function. The female genital is represented in the same manner by caves, bottles, boxes, doors, jewel cases, gardens, flowers, etc. Sexual pleasure is represented by activities like dancing, riding, climbing, flying. The falling out of hair or teeth is a symbolic representation of castration. Aside from sexual elements, symbols are expressive of the fundamental experiences of the little child. Father and mother are symbolized by king and queen or emperor and empress, children as little animals, death as a journey. (pp. 68–69)

This is one part of Freudian theory that often strikes people as ridiculous, and it has given Freud and psychoanalytic theory a bad name in many circles. However, Freud is often disparaged for this aspect of his theory by people who have not read his work at all, or who have read very little of it. To the average person, and to many others who have read only a little in the field, the idea of seeing pencils and cigars as penises is simply absurd. One of the nice things about

psychoanalytic theory is that this kind of behavior can be explained as repression—the refusal to acknowledge one’s sexuality and other aspects of the psyche.

Many of Freud’s critics take comfort in quoting a statement that has been attributed to him: “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” They generally employ this remark when someone else has used a Freudian interpretation of symbols to describe some object or artifact as a phallic symbol. I once suggested that the Washington monument, a great shaft erected in honor of the *father* of our country, is quite obviously a phallic symbol—although I don’t believe that the people responsible for creating the monument thought of it as such. “Ha!” replied a critic, who then offered the cigar quote.

My point here is that if sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, at other times a cigar is *not* just a cigar. You can’t have it both ways. The notion that certain objects represent, to the unconscious mind, penises (and other objects, of course, represent vaginas or wombs) may strike you as absurd, but if you are going to argue that suggesting something is a phallic symbol is incorrect in some cases, you must accept the notion that in other cases, suggesting something is a phallic symbol may be correct.

In any case, dreams require interpretation, and that interpretation must be keyed to the dreamer’s life. The dreamer can help an analyst to discover a dream’s true meaning by participating in free association—revealing all the thoughts that come into his or her mind—and by restructuring the dream. Fromm (1957) writes:

This true dream, which is the expression of our hidden desires, Freud calls the “latent dream.” The distorted version of the dream as we remember it is the “manifest dream” and the process of distortion and disguise is the “dream-work.” The main mechanisms through which the dream-work translates the latent into the manifest dream are condensation, displacement and secondary elaboration. By condensation Freud refers to the fact that the manifest dream is much shorter than the latent dream. It leaves out a number of elements of the latent dream, combines fragments of various elements, and condenses them into one new element in the manifest dream. . . . By displacement Freud refers to the fact that an element of the latent dream, and often a very important one, is expressed by a remote element in the manifest dream and usually one which appears to be quite unimportant. (pp. 69–70)

The process of secondary elaboration involves filling in gaps in the dream, repairing inconsistencies, and so on, so the manifest dream *seems* consistent and coherent. Two things make analyzing dreams especially difficult: the fact that elements in dreams often stand for their opposites, and the fact that the manifest dream is not a coherent narrative but a series of disconnected images. Thus a dream represents a formidable problem to the analyst, who must understand how dreams disguise and distort things and be able to relate what is found in dreams to the dreamer's personal life.

Jacques Lacan, a French thinker, has suggested that the semiotic concepts of metaphor and metonymy are useful for understanding dreams. Condensation, according to Lacan, is similar to what I have described in Chapter 1 of this volume as metaphor, and displacement is similar to metonymy. In condensation and in metaphor, we tie concepts together; in displacement and in metonymy, we substitute one thing for something else. Lacan differs with Freud over the nature of the unconscious. According to Freud, the unconscious is chaotic and preverbal, whereas Lacan (1966) argues that "the unconscious is structured like a language," which suggests that semiotics and linguistics might be useful in understanding how the unconscious works.

Recently, some researchers have suggested that Freud's theories about dreams being responses to experiences and being based on wish fulfillment might be inadequate. Whatever the case, his notions about how dreams function and the roles that condensation and displacement play in dreams have interesting implications for the study of how the media affect individuals and, through individuals, society.

As I have noted above, many of the products of the mass media can be viewed as similar to dreams—in analyzing these products, we must look for distortions and disguises, we must concern ourselves with the unconscious and with censorship, and we must relate what we discover in mediated works to the personal histories of the dreamers (which involve both their biographies and their social situations). We must also recognize the influences of the psyches of the creators and interpreters of these works. Clearly, the situation is quite complicated.

We can assume that apart from the surface communication between the artist/creator and the audience/receiver, there is also communication from the subconscious or unconscious of one to that of the other, so that some of the most important aspects of what we get from media may be submerged and not readily observable. This is why knowledge of the psyche and how it functions is so important.

❖ CONDENSATION AND DISPLACEMENT

As noted above, the symbolic content of dreams is represented in two important ways—through condensation and displacement. Charles Brenner defines condensation in his book *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (1974): “The term ‘condensation’ is used to indicate the representation of several ideas or images by a single word or image, or even a part of one” (p. 51). Freud offers a description of the process in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1965):

The first thing that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream content with the dream thought is that a work of *condensation* on a large scale has been carried out. Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of dream thoughts. If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space. (pp. 312–313)

And even this is incomplete, says Freud. It’s never possible to be sure, he suggests, that a dream has been completely analyzed and interpreted.

Brenner (1974) defines displacement as “the representation of a part by the whole, or vice versa, or, in general, the substitution of one idea or image by another which is associatively connected with it” (p. 51). We use displacement in our dreams because we don’t wish to confront certain phenomena directly, as this might wake us, and so we find symbolic substitutes that are less threatening. And what is it that we seek to displace? Brenner writes:

The list of what may be represented by a symbol is not very long. It comprises the body and its parts, particularly the sexual organs, buttocks, anus, urinary and alimentary tracts, and the breasts; members of the immediate family, such as mother, father, sister and brother; certain bodily functions and experiences, such as sexual intercourse, urination, defecation, eating, weeping, rage, and sexual excitement; birth; death; and a few others. The reader will notice that these are things which are of great interest to the small child, in other words that they are things important to an individual at a time when his ego is still immature. (p. 52)

It's important to recognize that these processes are also found in mass-mediated dreamlike texts, such as sitcoms, soap operas, commercials, advertisements, sporting events, spy stories, crime shows, and many other kinds of texts, which helps explain why the media fascinate us so much. Hollywood has been called a "dream factory," and two of the processes that play important roles in films are condensation and displacement.

❖ AGGRESSION AND GUILT

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1962), one of his last books, Freud discusses aggressiveness in people:

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus* [Man is a wolf to man]. (p. 58)

In this passage Freud suggests that aggressiveness is instinctual, but secondary to more basic instincts, as his use of the phrase "a powerful share" indicates. This aggressiveness could threaten to disrupt or even destroy society and civilization as we know it, so a powerful opposing force is brought into play. This force is guilt, which, Freud (1962) explains, is aggression turned back on itself:

Another question concerns us. . . . What means does civilization employ in order to inhibit the aggressiveness which opposes it, to make it harmless, to get rid of it, perhaps? . . . [Man's] aggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from—that is, it is directed toward his own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as super-ego, and which now, in the form of "conscience," is ready to put into action against the ego the

same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would like to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals. . . . Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery of the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city. (pp. 70–71)

In fact, Freud argues, we are made to feel so guilty that at times we become overwhelmed with guilt and forfeit our sense of happiness. The “cost” of civilization is generally too great for us; we are forced to renounce too much (especially our sexuality), and we suffer from too much guilt.

This is where humor comes in, for in humor we have developed a way to allow ourselves to enjoy certain kinds of aggression by masking them and thus evading guilt feelings. Freud analyzes humor in great detail in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, one of his most impressive works. Freud was drawn to the study of humor—a subject that has never been satisfactorily explained—because of his interest in the psyche, the unconscious, and human aggressiveness.

❖ JUNGIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

Carl Jung is, after Freud, probably the most important psychoanalytic theorist. He was originally associated with Freud, but he moved away from Freud's ideas and founded his own school of “analytic psychology.” Jung elaborated a number of concepts that have led to different ways of helping people and, for our purposes, of analyzing texts. I discuss some of these concepts briefly below.

Archetype

An archetype is a universal theme found, according to Jung, in dreams, myths, religions, and works of art. Archetypes exist independent of the personal unconscious of individuals. They are connected, Jung theorized, to past history and an alleged collective unconscious found in all people. Archetypes are unconscious, Jungians argue, and we become aware of them only as the result of images that come to us in dreams, works of art, or everyday emotional experiences we have that connect us to them in ways that, suddenly, we recognize. As Jung (1964) explains:

What we properly call instincts are physiological urges, and are perceived by the senses. But at the same time, they also manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images. These manifestations are what I call the archetypes. They are without known origin; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world—even where transmission by direct descent or “cross fertilization” through migration must be ruled out. (p. 69)

Jung suggests that “the hero figure is an archetype, which has existed since time immemorial” (p. 73), and so the same applies to the myth of Paradise or of a past “golden age,” when people lived in peace and abundance.

Collective Unconscious

The source of Jung’s archetypes is what he describes as the *collective unconscious*. As Jung (1964) explains, making an analogy with instincts:

We do not assume that each new-born animal creates its own instincts as an individual acquisition, and we must not suppose that human individuals invent their specific human ways with every new birth. Like the instincts, the collective thought patterns of the human mind are innate and inherited. They function, when the occasion arises, in more or less the same way in all of us. (p. 75)

This explains, Jungians argue, why myths are universal and certain themes and motifs are found in works of art throughout history and everywhere in the world. Jung’s notions about archetypes, the collective unconscious, and the universality of myths, I should add, are very controversial, and many psychologists and others take issue with them. It is impossible to demonstrate, for instance, that a collective unconscious actually exists.

The Myth of the Hero

Heroes, which are archetypes and manifestations of the collective unconscious, play an important role in Jungian thought. As one prominent Jungian, Joseph L. Henderson (1964), notes:

The myth of the hero is the most common and the best-known myth in the world. We find it in the classical mythology of Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages, in the Far East, and among contemporary primitive tribes. It also appears in our dreams. . . .

These hero myths vary enormously in detail, but the more closely one examines them the more one sees that structurally they are very similar. They have, that is to say, a universal pattern, even though they were developed by groups or individuals without any direct cultural contact with each other. . . . Over and over again one hears a tale describing a hero's miraculous but humble birth, his early proof of superhuman strength, his rapid rise to prominence or power, his triumphant struggle with the forces of evil, his fallibility to the sin of pride (*hybris*), and his fall through betrayal or a "heroic" sacrifice that ends in his death. (p. 110)

This description applies to so-called tragic heroes. Most heroes, especially those found in the mass media, generally don't succumb to the sin of pride; they usually survive to fight, in endless succession, new villains, who keep appearing with incredible regularity. The myth of the hero, according to Henderson, has the function of helping individuals develop their ego consciousness, which enables them to deal with problems they will confront as they grow older. Heroic figures help young people with problems of separation and individuation from their parents and other tutelary figures, which explains why heroes are found throughout history and why they are so important.

The Shadow Element in the Psyche

What Jungians call the *shadow* refers to the dark side of the human psyche, which we generally keep hidden from consciousness, although it is something we must eventually recognize and deal with. Henderson (1964) explains Jung's understanding of the shadow:

Dr. Jung has pointed out that the shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality. But this darkness is not just the simple converse of the conscious ego. Just as the ego contains unfavorable and destructive attitudes, so the shadow has good qualities—normal instincts and creative impulses. Ego and shadow, indeed, although separate, are inextricably linked

together in much the same way that thought and feeling are related to each other. (p. 110)

There is, then, according to Jungians, a battle for deliverance that occurs in the psyche between the shadow and the ego. Heroes provide the means (or are the vehicles) by which, symbolically, the ego "liberates the mature man from a regressive longing to return to the blissful state of infancy in a world dominated by his mother" (Henderson, 1964, p. 111).

Freudians do not have this concept, but it is easy to see that it is vaguely analogous to what they describe as the unconscious. The struggle for dominance between the shadow and the ego may be compared with the battle that Freudians assert goes on between the id and the superego, which the ego tries to mediate. Jung's shadow seems to be more negative than Freud's id, but both are considered to be the source of creative activity.

The Anima and the Animus

In Jungian thought, the anima represents the female element found in all males and the animus represents the male element found in all females. This duality, according to Jungians, is symbolized in hermaphrodites (people with the sexual organs of both sexes) and in witches, priestesses, medicine men, and shamans. M.-L. von Franz (1964), a Jungian theorist, discusses the anima and animus in terms of their impact on personality, the arts, and related phenomena:

The most frequent manifestation of the anima takes the form of erotic fantasy. Men may be driven to nurse their fantasies by looking at films and strip-tease shows, or by day-dreaming over pornographic material. This is a crude, primitive aspect of the anima, which becomes compulsive only when a man does not sufficiently cultivate his feeling relationships—when his feeling attitude toward life has remained infantile. (pp. 179–180)

Von Franz suggests that the anima has a positive side, however, that enables men to do such things as find the right marriage partners and explore their inner values, leading them to more profound insights into their own psyches. The animus functions in much the same way for women. It is formed, von Franz suggests, essentially by the woman's father, and can have positive and negative influences. It can lead to

coldness, obstinacy, and hypercritical behavior, but, conversely, it can help a woman to develop inner strength, to take an enterprising approach to life, and to relate to men in positive ways.

❖ PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS
OF MEDIA: A CAUTIONARY NOTE

A subject as vast and complicated as the psyche poses enormous problems for a writer who wants to suggest how psychoanalytic concepts can be applied to analysis of the mass media. As with any other subject, there is always the problem of oversimplification and reductionist thinking. In this chapter I have attempted to suggest how the most fundamental concepts in psychoanalytic literature can be applied to the media—how they may help us to understand human motivation and perhaps also our reactions to what we read, see, and hear.

Because there are so many competing schools of psychoanalytic thought, and because the general public, which is not familiar with many of the concepts used by psychoanalytic thinkers, is often hostile to these concepts, psychoanalytic criticism is a difficult pursuit. But how else can we understand the way *King Kong* or *Star Trek* or *Hamlet* (or any other work in print or film media) has the power to seize our attention and move us in profound and interesting ways?

What Simon Lesser says about literature in *Fiction and the Unconscious* (1957) can be applied to just about all media:

The supreme virtue of psychoanalysis, from the point of view of its potential utility for literary study, is that it has investigated the very aspects of man's nature with which the greatest writers of fiction have been preoccupied: the emotional, unconscious or only partly comprehended bases of our behavior. Unlike other psychologies, but like Sophocles and Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Melville and Hawthorne, it has concerned itself with the surging, non-rational forces which play so large a part in determining our destiny as well as the part of our being which tries, often in vain, to control and direct them. It offers us a systematic and well-validated body of knowledge about those forces. (p. 15)

Lesser goes on, then, to say something about what we would call the audience and the way it responds to fiction and media in general:

It is my assumption that as we read we unconsciously *understand* at least some of a story's secret significance; to some extent our enjoyment is a product of this understanding. But some readers go on to try to account for the effect a story has had upon them, and to report what they discover. It is in connection with these later critical activities, which must be sharply differentiated I believe from the reading experience itself, that psychoanalytic concepts are likely to prove invaluable. They make it possible to deal with a portion of our response which was not hitherto accessible to criticism—permit us to explain reactions which were intuitive, fugitive and often non-verbal, and supply the key to the elements in the story responsible for those reactions. (p. 15)

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that my purpose in this chapter has been not to provide a comprehensive review of psychoanalytic techniques but to propose the usefulness of psychoanalytic criticism for helping us to understand and interpret both what we find carried by the mass media and our responses to it—a suggestion worth some thought.

❖ STUDY QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is meant by *the unconscious*?
2. The mental life of a human being is often compared to an iceberg. Draw this iceberg and show how it can be understood to represent mental life.
3. How did Dichter explain the use of cigarette lighters? How does this explanation relate to the psyche?
4. List and discuss the four stages of development that people pass through, according to Freud.
5. What, according to Freud, are the characteristics of anal eroticism?
6. Contrast Freud's topographic hypothesis with his structural hypothesis.
7. What is the Oedipus complex, and how has it been used to explain Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?

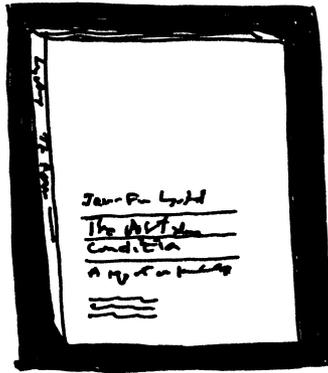
8. What did Freud say about symbols and how symbols function in dreams?
9. Describe and explain condensation, displacement, and secondary elaboration.
10. List and briefly describe six of the most important defense mechanisms and tell what roles they play.
11. How does the psyche handle guilt? How is humor related to this process?
12. What do Jungians believe about archetypes, the collective unconscious, the shadow, and the anima and animus?
13. What cautions should one observe in approaching analysis of media (or anything else) from a psychoanalytic perspective?

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Much of the debate about media in contemporary society has a sociological dimension, so this chapter addresses, first, the sociological concepts that have the most immediate applicability to media analysis. This is followed by a discussion of uses and gratifications theory that includes a list of some of the reasons people use the mass media—that is, the uses and gratifications connected to the media. The chapter ends with a discussion of content analysis and a simple content analysis exercise that may yield interesting results.