

## Psychoanalytic criticism

We're starting our study of critical theory with psychoanalytic criticism because, whether we realize it or not, psychoanalytic concepts have become part of our everyday lives, and therefore psychoanalytic thinking should have the advantage of familiarity. If you've ever told an angry friend "Don't take it out on me!" you were accusing that friend of displacement, which is the psychoanalytic name for transferring our anger with one person onto another person (usually one who won't fight back or can't hurt us as badly as the person with whom we are really angry). Psychoanalytic concepts such as sibling rivalry, inferiority complexes, and defense mechanisms are in such common use that most of us feel we know what they mean without ever having heard them defined. The disadvantage of such common usage, however, is that most of us have acquired a very simplistic idea of what these concepts mean, and in their clichéd form they seem rather superficial if not altogether meaningless. Couple this unfortunate fact with our fear that psychoanalysis wants to invade our most private being and reveal us to ourselves and to the world as somehow inadequate, even sick, and the result is very often a deep-seated mistrust of "psychobabble." Indeed, our common use of the word psychobabble illustrates our belief that psychoanalysis is both impossible to understand and meaningless. Thus, in a culture that uses psychoanalytic concepts in its everyday language we frequently see the wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis as a useful way of understanding human behavior.

I hope this chapter will show you that seeing the world psychoanalytically can be simple without being simplistic. If we take the time to understand some key concepts about human experience offered by psychoanalysis, we can begin to see the ways in which these concepts operate in our daily lives in profound rather than superficial ways, and we'll begin to understand human behaviors that until now may have seemed utterly baffling. And, of course, if psychoanalysis can help us better understand human behavior, then it must certainly be able to help us understand literary texts, which are about human behavior. The concepts we'll discuss below are based on the psychoanalytic principles established by Sigmund

Freud (1856–1939), whose theory of the psyche often is referred to today as classical psychoanalysis. We must remember that Freud evolved his ideas over a long period of time, and many of his ideas changed as he developed them. In addition, much of his thinking was, as he pointed out, speculative, and he hoped that others would continue to develop and even correct certain of his ideas over time. So the attempt in this chapter is to outline those areas of classical psychoanalytic theory that are particularly useful to literary criticism and to show how this view of human behavior is relevant to our experience of literature. Later in the chapter, we'll also take a brief look at the more recent work of nontraditional psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan.<sup>1</sup>

### The origins of the unconscious

When we look at the world through a psychoanalytic lens, we see that it is comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in the family and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behavior that are the direct result of that early experience. Because the goal of psychoanalysis is to help us resolve our psychological problems, often called disorders or dysfunctions (and none of us is completely free of psychological problems), the focus is on patterns of behavior that are destructive in some way. I say patterns of behavior because our repetition of destructive behavior reveals the existence of a significant psychological difficulty that has not been fully resolved.

I believe that what I really

doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions. Rather, it gives them force by making them the organizers of our current experience: we unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to "play out," without admitting it to ourselves, our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress. Thus, for psychoanalysis, the unconscious isn't a passive reservoir of neural data, though the word is sometimes used this way in other disciplines and in common parlance; rather, the unconscious is a dynamic entity that engages us at the deepest level of our being.

Until we find a way to know and acknowledge to ourselves the true cause(s) of our repressed wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts, we hang onto them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways. For example, if I don't realize that I still long for the love I never received from my long-dead, alcoholic father, I am very liable to select an alcoholic, aloof mate so that I can reenact my relationship with my father and "this time" make him love me. In fact, even when I do realize that I have this kind of psychological issue with my father, it is difficult to recognize when I am "acting it out" with another person. Indeed, I probably won't see the profound similarity between my father and my beloved: I'll focus instead on superficial differences (my father has dark hair and my beloved is blond). In other words, I will experience my longing for my neglectful father as

longing for my current heartthrob. I will feel that I am sweethearts, perhaps even desperately in love, and I will want to know how to get him to love me back.

for example, "I'm the failure"; "I'm the perfect child"; "I must always 'come second' to my brother"; "I'm unlovable"; or "I'm responsible for my parents' problems." The oedipal conflict (competition with the parent of the same gender for the attention and affection of the parent of the opposite gender) and all the commonplace ideas of old-style Freudian theory (for example, sibling rivalry, penis envy, castration anxiety) are merely descriptions of the dominant ways in which family conflicts can be lived. They give us merely starting points for understanding differences among individuals. For example, in some families, sibling rivalry (competition with siblings for the attention and affection of parents) can occur, in an important sense, between a parent and child. If I feel jealous of my mate's affection for our child, what may be going on is a reenactment of my unresolved childhood rivalry with a sibling I believed was more loved by my parents than I. That is, seeing my mate's affection for our child reawakens some or all of the hurt I felt when I saw my parents' affection for the sibling I believed they preferred. And so I now find myself competing with my child for the attention of my mate.

It is important to note that oedipal attachments, sibling rivalry, and the like are considered developmental stages. In other words, we all go through these experiences, and they are a natural and healthy part of maturing and establishing our own identities. It is when we fail to outgrow these conflicts that we have trouble. Here's an example common to many women. If I remain in competition with my mother for my father's love (a competition that can go on in my unconscious long after one or both parents are dead), I will probably be most attracted to men who already have girlfriends or wives because their attachment to another woman will allow me to replay my competition with my mother and "this time" win. Of course, I might not win the man this time, and even if I do, once I've won him I'll lose interest in him. Although I probably don't realize it consciously, his desirability lies in his attachment to someone else. Once he's mine, he's not so exciting anymore. On the other hand, if as a child I felt that I won my father's affection from my mother (which he may have given me as a way of punishing or avoiding my mother), then I may be attracted to men who already have girlfriends or wives (and who don't seem likely to leave them) because I feel I need to be punished for "stealing" Dad from my mother. Of course, another way to punish myself for stealing Dad from my mother (or for wanting to steal him or, if he sexually molested me, for feeling that it was somehow my fault) is to be unable to respond sexually to my mate.

A common way in which men replay unresolved oedipal attachments involves what is often called the "good-girl/bad-girl" attitude toward women. If I remain in competition (usually unconscious) with my father for my mother's love, I am very liable to deal with my guilt by categorizing women as either "like Mom" ("good girls") or "not like Mom" ("bad girls") and then by being able to enjoy

sex only with women who are "not like Mom." In other words, because I unconsciously associate sexual desire with desire for my mother, sexual desire makes me feel guilty and dirty, and for this reason I can enjoy it only with "bad girls," who are themselves guilty and dirty and whom I don't associate with Mom. This view often creates a seduce-and-abandon pattern of behavior toward women. When I seduce a "bad girl," I must abandon her (sooner or later) because I cannot allow myself to be permanently attached to someone so unworthy of marriage, that is, unworthy of being classified with my mother. When I seduce a "good girl," two things happen: (1) she becomes a "bad girl" and, like other "bad girls," unworthy of my permanent commitment, and (2) I feel so guilty for "soiling" her (which is like "soiling" Mom) that I must abandon her to avoid my guilt. The point is that, for both women and men, only by recognizing the psychological motivations for our destructive behavior can we hope to begin to change that behavior.

### The defenses, anxiety, and core issues

Our unconscious desires not to recognize or change our destructive behaviors—because we have formed our identities around them and because we are afraid of what we will find if we examine them too closely—are served by our defenses. Defenses are the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious. In other words, they are the processes by which we keep the repressed repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel we can't handle knowing. Defenses include selective perception (hearing and seeing only what we feel we can handle), selective memory (modifying our memories so that we don't feel overwhelmed by them or forgetting painful events entirely), denial (believing that the problem doesn't exist or the unpleasant incident never happened), avoidance (staying away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious—i.e., repressed—experience or emotion), displacement ("taking it out" on someone or something less threatening than the person who caused our fear, hurt, frustration, or anger), and projection (ascribing our fear, problem, or guilty desire to someone else and then condemning him or her for it, in order to deny that we have it ourselves).

Perhaps one of the most complex defenses is regression, the temporary return to a former psychological state, which is not just imagined but relived. Regression can involve a return either to a painful or a pleasant experience. It is a defense because it carries our thoughts away from some present difficulty (as when Death of a Salesman's Willy Loman flashes back to his past in order to avoid the unpleasant realities of his present life). However, it differs from other defenses in that it carries with it the opportunity for active reversal, the acknowledgment and working through of repressed experiences and emotions, because we can

alter the effects of a wound only when we relive the wounding experience. This is why regression is such a useful therapeutic tool.

Many psychological experiences can function as defenses, even when not formally defined as such. For example, *fear of intimacy*—fear of emotional involvement with another human being—is often an effective defense against learning about our own psychological wounds because it keeps us at an emotional distance in relationships most likely to bring those wounds to the surface: relationships with lovers, spouses, offspring, and best friends. By not permitting ourselves to get too close to significant others, we “protect” ourselves from the painful past experiences that intimate relationships inevitably dredge up. Having more than one romantic or sexual partner at a time, breaking off romances when they start to evolve past the infatuation stage, and keeping oneself too busy to spend much time with family and friends are just a few of the many ways we can maintain an emotional distance from loved ones without admitting to ourselves what we are doing.

Of course, sometimes our defenses momentarily break down, and this is when we experience *anxiety*. Anxiety can be an important experience because it can reveal our *core issues*. Let's begin our discussion of core issues and their relationship to anxiety with some examples of the more common core issues.

*Fear of intimacy*—the chronic and overpowering feeling that emotional closeness will seriously hurt or destroy us and that we can remain emotionally safe only by remaining at an emotional distance from others at all times. As we saw above, fear of intimacy can also function as a defense. If this particular defense occurs frequently or continually, then fear of intimacy is probably a core issue.

*Fear of abandonment*—the unshakable belief that our friends and loved ones are going to desert us (physical abandonment) or don't really care about us (emotional abandonment).

*Fear of betrayal*—the nagging feeling that our friends and loved ones can't be trusted, for example, can't be trusted not to lie to us, not to laugh at us behind our backs, or in the case of romantic partners, not to cheat on us by dating others.

*Low self-esteem*—the belief that we are less worthy than other people and, therefore, don't deserve attention, love, or any other of life's rewards. Indeed, we often believe that we deserve to be punished by life in some way.

*Insecure or unstable sense of self*—the inability to sustain a feeling of personal identity, to sustain a sense of knowing ourselves. This core issue makes us very vulnerable to the influence of other people, and we may find ourselves

continually changing the way we look or behave as we become involved with different individuals or groups.

*Oedipal fixation* (or *oedipal complex*)—a dysfunctional bond with a parent of the opposite sex that we don't outgrow in adulthood and that doesn't allow us to develop mature relationships with our peers. (Tyson 26–27)

You may notice that some of the core issues listed above seem related. Just as fear of intimacy can function as both a defense and a core issue, a given core issue can result from another core issue or can cause the emergence of another core issue. For example, if fear of abandonment is my core issue, I am liable to develop fear of intimacy as a core issue as well. My conviction that I will eventually be abandoned by anyone for whom I care might lead me to chronically avoid emotional intimacy in the belief that, if I don't get too close to a loved one, I won't be hurt when that loved one inevitably abandons me. To use another example, if low self-esteem is my core issue, I might develop fear of abandonment as a core issue as well. My belief that I am unworthy of love might lead me to expect that I will be abandoned eventually by anyone I love. Or my low self-esteem might lead me to develop fear of intimacy. My belief that I am less worthy than other people might lead me to keep others at an emotional distance in the hope that they won't find out that I am unworthy of them. Of course, these are just some of the ways that core issues are connected to one another. I'm sure you can think of others.

The most important fact to remember is that core issues define our being in fundamental ways. They do not consist of occasional negative feelings, such as passing episodes of insecurity or low self-image. Having an occasional “bad-hair day,” for instance, does not indicate the presence of a core issue. Rather, core issues stay with us throughout life and, unless effectively addressed, they determine our behavior in destructive ways of which we are usually unaware. In other words, anxiety can tell us a good deal about ourselves because we are anxious in situations in which our core issues are in play. For example, I become anxious when one of my friends goes to the movies with another friend because it makes me relive the abandonment I felt from a neglectful parent whether or not I see the connection between the two events. That is, I feel abandoned now because I was wounded by feeling abandoned as a child, and I am anxious because I don't want to admit to myself that, in some important way, I was abandoned by my parent. So I become hurt and angry with my friend without consciously knowing why. My unconscious knowledge of the reason why is what makes me anxious. In this way, anxiety always involves the return of the repressed: I am anxious because something I repressed—some painful or frightening or guilty experience—is resurfacing, and I want to keep it repressed. Psychoanalysis, as a form of therapy, is the controlled working in and with anxiety. Its goal (unlike that



of ego psychology, which is a popular form of therapy today) isn't to strengthen our defenses or restore us to social adaptation but to break down our defenses in order to effect basic changes in the structures of our personality and the way we act.

Under ordinary circumstances, however, our defenses keep us unaware of our unconscious experience, and our anxiety, even if it is somewhat prolonged or recurrent, doesn't succeed in breaking through our repression. How then, without the aid of psychotherapy, can we learn about the operations of our own unconscious? As I noted earlier, patterns in our behavior, if we can recognize them, provide clues, especially in the area of interpersonal relations and, within that domain, especially in our romantic or sexual relationships, because it is here that our initial unresolved conflicts within the family are reenacted. In addition, we have access to our unconscious, if we know how to use it, through our dreams and through any creative activities we engage in because both our dreams and our creativity, independent of our conscious will or desire, draw directly on the unconscious.

### Dreams and dream symbols

When we sleep, it is believed that our defenses do not operate in the same manner they do when we are awake. During sleep, the unconscious is free to express itself, and it does so in our dreams. However, even in our dreams there is some censorship, some protection against frightening insights into our repressed experiences and emotions, and that protection takes the form of dream distortion. The "message" our unconscious expresses in our dreams, which is the dream's underlying meaning, or latent content, is altered so that we don't readily recognize it through processes called displacement and condensation. Dream displacement occurs whenever we use a "safe" person, event, or object as a "stand-in" to represent a more threatening person, event, or object. For example, I may dream that an elementary school teacher is sexually molesting me in order to express (and at the same time avoid) my unconscious knowledge that one of my parents sexually molested me. Condensation occurs during a dream whenever we use a single dream image or event to represent more than one unconscious wound or conflict. For example, my dream that I'm battling a ferocious bear might represent psychological "battles" or conflicts both at home and at work. Or, to expand on the above example, my dream that I am being sexually molested by an elementary school teacher might represent my unconscious feeling that my self-esteem is under attack by any number of family members, friends, and colleagues. (A single dream event may thus be a product of both displacement and condensation.)

Because displacement and condensation occur while we dream, these processes are referred to collectively as primary revision. What we actually dream, once primary revision has disguised the unconscious message, or the dream's latent content, is the dream's manifest content. The dream images described above—images of an elementary school teacher molesting me and of myself battling a ferocious bear—are examples of manifest content. What these images actually mean is the dreams' latent content, and that is a matter of interpretation. Is the elementary school teacher a stand-in for one of my parents, or are the images of sexual molestation a stand-in for verbal attacks on my self-esteem? Does the bear represent a psychological conflict, and if so, what is that conflict? In interpreting our dreams then, our goal is to recall the manifest content and try to uncover the latent content. However, we must remember that, at this conscious stage as well, we're very liable to unconsciously change the dream in order to further protect ourselves from knowing what is too painful to know. For example, we might forget certain parts of the dream or remember those parts somewhat differently from how they actually occurred. This process, which takes place when we are awake, is called secondary revision.

It may be helpful to think of the dream's manifest content as a kind of dream symbolism that can be interpreted much the way we interpret symbols of any kind, if we keep in mind that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a given symbol and its meaning. That is, while there are some images that tend to have the same symbolic meaning from dreamer to dreamer, at least if those dreamers are members of the same culture, there are also important individual differences in the ways we represent our unconscious experience in our dreams. So to increase our chances of interpreting our dreams accurately, we must learn over time how we tend to represent certain ideas, feelings, and people in our dreams, and we must know the context in which a particular dream image occurred: what happened in the dream before, during, and after a particular dream image appeared?

Certain general principles of dream interpretation tend to apply in most cases, and they are as follows. Because dreamers create all the "characters" in their dreams, there is a real sense in which each person we dream about is really a part of our own psychological experience that we project during the dream onto a stand-in. If I dream that my sister gives birth to a stillborn child, for example, I might be dreaming either that I have given birth to a stillborn child (a failed relationship? a failed career? a failed artistic endeavor?) or that I am a stillborn child (am I feeling abandoned? helpless? depressed?). As this example makes evident, dreams about children almost always reveal something about our feelings toward ourselves or toward the child that is still within us and that is probably still wounded in some way.

When does the child come from a bit of our own self?

Given that our sexuality is such an important reflection of our psychological being, our dreams about our gender roles or about our attitudes toward ourselves and others as sexual beings are also revealing. In order to interpret these dreams, we need to be aware of the male and female imagery that can occur in them. Male imagery, or phallic symbols, can include towers, rockets, guns, arrows, swords, and the like. In short, if it stands upright or goes off, it might be functioning as a phallic symbol. For example, if I dream that I am holding my friend at gunpoint, I might be expressing unconscious sexual aggression toward that friend or toward someone else for whom that friend is a safe stand-in (such as my friend's mate or my mate). In addition, my sexual aggression might be interpreted in a number of ways: is the emphasis on the sexual, on the aggression, or on both? Do I desire my friend's mate, or am I jealous of my friend's mate? Do I want to become more assertive in my sexual relationship with my mate, or do I want to hurt my mate's sexual self-image as my mate has hurt mine? To decide which interpretation is correct requires more data in the form of other similar dreams, patterns in my waking behavior, and an honest analysis of my feelings about the dream and about the people involved. Analogously, if I dream that I am being held at gunpoint, I might be expressing an unconscious feeling that my sexuality, or my identity in general, is being exploited or endangered.

Female imagery can include caves, rooms, walled-in gardens (like the ones we see in paintings representing the Virgin Mary), cups, or enclosures and containers of any kind. If the image can be a stand-in for the womb, then it might be functioning as female imagery. Thus, if I dream I am trapped or lost in a small, dark room, I might be expressing an unconscious fear of my mother's control over me or an unconscious fear that I have never completely matured as a human being. Perhaps I'm expressing both, for these two problems are certainly related. Female imagery can also include milk, fruit, and other kinds of food as well as the containers in which food is delivered, such as bottles or cups (yes, there is an overlap here with womb imagery)—in other words, anything that can be a stand-in for the breast, which is itself a stand-in for emotional nurturing. So if I dream that I am trying to feed a litter of hungry kittens from a small and rapidly diminishing bottle of milk (a dream that either gender can have), I might be expressing an unconscious feeling that too much is being asked of me by my children or by my spouse or by my employer—or by all of them—or that I am putting too much pressure on myself to take care of others. Analogously, if I dream I am hungry or looking for food, I might be expressing an unconscious need for emotional nurturing.

To move to other kinds of symbols, if I dream about water—which is fluid, changeable, sometimes soothing, sometimes dangerous, and often deeper than it looks—chances are good that I'm dreaming about my sexuality or the realm of the emotions or the realm of the unconscious. So a dream that I'm about to be overwhelmed by a tidal wave probably indicates some fear of being overwhelmed

by a repressed emotion that I fear is about to erupt. Of course, water is also related to our experience in the womb, so dreams that involve water, especially immersion in water, might also be about our relationships with our mothers. Dreams about buildings may refer to my relationship with myself, with the attic or the basement as the stand-in for the unconscious. Or dreams about buildings may refer to my relationship with some institution that the building represents for me, for example, the church, the school, the company for which I work, or the law (which, because it represents social rules and definitions, might be a stand-in for my superego). Although we might often dream about fears and wounds that we know we have—that are clearly part of our conscious experience—our dreams about these concerns probably indicate that we need to work further on them, that they bite into us in ways we aren't ready to admit. Of course, recurring dreams or recurring dream images are the most reliable indicators of our unconscious concerns.

Regardless of how frightening or disturbing our dreams are, they are relatively safe outlets for unconscious wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts because, as we have seen, they come to us in disguised form, and we will interpret them only to whatever extent we are ready to do so. In addition, if a dream becomes too threatening, we will wake up, as we most often do during nightmares. However, if my nightmares begin to occur while I'm awake—that is, if the breakdown of my defenses is more than temporary, if my anxiety cannot be abated, if the truth hidden by repression comes out before my conscious self in a manner I can neither disguise nor handle—then I am in crisis, or trauma.

### The meaning of death

Crisis brings into the spotlight wounds, fears, guilty desires, or unresolved conflicts that I have failed to deal with and that demand action. I am flooded by the past because I can now see what was really going on. This is how I can know myself through crisis. Trauma is also used, of course, to refer to a painful experience that scars us psychologically. Thus, I might experience the childhood trauma of losing a sibling to illness, accidental death, or suicide and, in later life, experience the trauma, or crisis, of being flooded by all the guilt, denial, and conflict I've repressed concerning that death. And I might also see, for example, the ways in which my parents unconsciously encouraged my guilt in order to relieve their own.

In fact, our relationship to death, whether or not we are traumatized by it in childhood, is a principal organizer of our psychological experience. Before we examine how our relationship to death operates in this way, it is important to note that death is the subject that, it seems to me, has given psychoanalytic

theorists the most trouble probably because of its importance in their own as well as everyone else's, psychological experience. There has been some tendency to treat death as an abstraction—that is, to theorize about it in ways that don't allow us to feel its force too intimately—presumably because its force is too frightening. So even when, or especially when, theorists have addressed the subject of death directly, they sometimes have done so in ways that tend to keep us at an emotional distance from themselves and, therefore, from us. I think this is the reason—to cite just one example—behind Freud's theory that death is a biological drive, which he called the death drive, or *thanatos*.

In suggesting that human beings have a death drive, Freud's attempt was to account for the alarming degree of self-destructive behavior he saw both in individuals, who seemed bent on destroying themselves psychologically if not physically, and in whole nations, whose constant wars and internal conflicts could be viewed as little other than a form of mass suicide. He concluded that there must be something in our biological makeup as a species to explain this death work, this psychological and physical self-destruction. Of course, when we conceptualize our death work as a drive, as something natural and unavoidable, we are off the hook of having to probe too deeply into its workings or to try to change it; after all, nothing we do can alter a biological drive. This is why I call the concept of the death drive an abstraction, an idea that operates only on the conceptual level, with no connection to the concrete world of experience. Although the concept of the death drive rests on biology, which is concrete reality, it takes our thoughts and our feelings out of the everyday world of action and responsibility, just as abstractions do. And this is exactly why I think some theorists have found abstract explanations of death attractive. Such explanations take us out of the everyday world in which our acts of psychological and physical self-destruction occur.

A more useful, and I think more accurate, way of understanding our relationship to death is to examine it in relation to the rest of our psychological experience, of which it is an integral part. If we do this, we will see that death, in particular fear of death, is intimately connected to a number of other psychological realities. And we will see that individuals respond to death in various ways because of differences in their psychological makeup. In other words, while the processes I am about to describe probably occur in all of us, they will occur to different degrees and with different results in each individual.

First and foremost, for many of us, the thought of our own death keys into our fear of abandonment, our fear of being alone. Death is the ultimate abandonment: no matter how close we are to our loved ones, no matter how important we are in our communities, when we die we die alone. Even if we die in a plane crash with two hundred other people, we each die our own private death. Thus

one of the greatest comforts religious belief can offer is to assure us that we will not die alone and that after we die we will not be alone: God the Father will be there for us and with us. Our Heavenly Father will not abandon his children even when everyone else we know has done so.

Fear of abandonment also plays a role when we fear the death of others. When children lose a parent, when adults lose a spouse, the overwhelming feeling of loss is often a feeling of abandonment. How could you leave me? Don't you love me? What did I do wrong? Sometimes the bereaved feel abandoned even by God. In this context, whether we realize it or not, the death of a loved one pushes our guilt buttons: somehow I must have been inadequate; I must have done something wrong or I wouldn't be punished in this way. In fact, fear of such a loss, of such intense psychological pain, is probably the biggest reason why some of us are afraid to get too close to another person or are afraid to love too deeply. If I can hold something back, not give my whole self over to the loved one, then I will be better able to bear the loss when the beloved dies.

Fear of death is thus often responsible—along with other reasons, as we saw earlier—for fear of intimacy. This is one of the ways we can see how fear of death often results in fear of life. That is, our fear of death, of losing our life, can result in our fear of being intimately attached to life. "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose," as so many blues and folk songs have pointed out. This fear of life can also be played out as a fear of risk. The ultimate loss, of which I am utterly terrified, is death. Therefore, I can't take any risk that might result in death. But life itself ultimately and inevitably results in death. Therefore, I can't risk living my life. I must somehow remove myself from it by doing as little as possible and by feeling as little as possible: I will try to be emotionally dead to avoid being hurt by death. Taken to its logical extreme, this relationship to death will result in suicide. My intense fear of losing my life makes living so painful and frightening that my only escape is death.

If we complicate matters by realizing that our fear of death is not merely fear of biological death but translates for most of us into fear of loss in general—loss of my mate's attention, loss of my children's love, loss of my health, loss of my job, loss of my looks, loss of my money—then we can see how death, emotional death if not biological death, is so attractive, at least on the unconscious level: if I don't feel anything, then I can't be hurt. And if we realize that our first experience of death is not biological at all, but the psychological "death" most of us suffered the first time we felt abandoned by a parent, then we can see the ways in which our early experiences of abandonment created our fear of death. This desire not to feel, this desire to insulate ourselves from life in order to insulate ourselves from pain, is probably the most common form of death work.

Is it any wonder then, given the enormous role that death plays in our lives, that we should be fascinated with it? In fact, I think it's reasonable to conclude that the greater our fear is, the greater our fascination becomes. Put another way,

I use sex to "purchase" something I want from my mate? Do I withhold sex to punish my mate? Do I avoid sexual encounters altogether? Do I seek frequent sexual encounters with different people? It is interesting to note that about

[illegible]

1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 2056, 2057, 2058, 2059, 2060, 2061, 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 2078, 2079, 2080, 2081, 2082, 2083, 2084, 2085, 2086, 2087, 2088, 2089, 2090, 2091, 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102, 2103, 2104, 2105, 2106, 2107, 2108, 2109, 2110, 2111, 2112, 2113, 2114, 2115, 2116, 2117, 2118, 2119, 2120, 2121, 2122, 2123, 2124, 2125, 2126, 2127, 2128, 2129, 2130, 2131, 2132, 2133, 2134, 2135, 2136, 2137, 2138, 2139, 2140, 2141, 2142, 2143, 2144, 2145, 2146, 2147, 2148, 2149, 2150, 2151, 2152, 2153, 2154, 2155, 2156, 2157, 2158, 2159, 2160, 2161, 2162, 2163, 2164, 2165, 2166, 2167, 2168, 2169, 2170, 2171, 2172, 2173, 2174, 2175, 2176, 2177, 2178, 2179, 2180, 2181, 2182, 2183, 2184, 2185, 2186, 2187, 2188, 2189, 2190, 2191, 2192, 2193, 2194, 2195, 2196, 2197, 2198, 2199, 2200, 2201, 2202, 2203, 2204, 2205, 2206, 2207, 2208, 2209, 2210, 2211, 2212, 2213, 2214, 2215, 2216, 2217, 2218, 2219, 2220, 2221, 2222, 2223, 2224, 2225, 2226, 2227, 2228, 2229, 2230, 2231, 2232, 2233, 2234, 2235, 2236, 2237, 2238, 2239, 2240, 2241, 2242, 2243, 2244, 2245, 2246, 2247, 2248, 2249, 2250, 2251, 2252, 2253, 2254, 2255, 2256, 2257, 2258, 2259, 2260, 2261, 2262, 2263, 2264, 2265, 2266, 2267, 2268, 2269, 2270, 2271, 2272, 2273, 2274, 2275, 2276, 2277, 2278, 2279, 2280, 2281, 2282, 2283, 2284, 2285, 2286, 2287, 2288, 2289, 2290, 2291, 2292, 2293, 2294, 2295, 2296, 2297, 2298, 2299, 2300, 2301, 2302, 2303, 2304, 2305, 2306, 2307, 2308, 2309, 2310, 2311, 2312, 2313, 2314, 2315, 2316, 2317, 2318, 2319, 2320, 2321, 2322, 2323, 2324, 2325, 2326, 2327, 2328, 2329, 2330, 2331, 2332, 2333, 2334, 2335, 2336, 2337, 2338, 2339, 2340, 2341, 2342, 2343, 2344, 2345, 2346, 2347, 2348, 2349, 2350, 2351, 2352, 2353, 2354, 2355, 2356, 2357, 2358, 2359, 2360, 2361, 2362, 2363, 2364, 2365, 2366, 2367, 2368, 2369, 2370, 2371, 2372, 2373, 2374, 2375, 2376, 2377, 2378, 2379, 2380, 2381, 2382, 2383, 2384, 2385, 2386, 2387, 2388, 2389, 2390, 2391, 2392, 2393, 2394, 2395, 2396, 2397, 2398, 2399, 2400, 2401, 2402, 2403, 2404, 2405, 2406, 2407, 2408, 2409, 2410, 2411, 2412, 2413, 2414, 2415, 2416, 2417, 2418, 2419, 2420, 2421, 2422, 2423, 2424, 2425, 2426, 2427, 2428, 2429, 2430, 2431, 2432, 2433, 2434, 2435, 2436, 2437, 2438, 2439, 2440, 2441, 2442, 2443, 2444, 2445, 2446, 2447, 2448, 2449, 2450, 2451, 2452, 2453, 2454, 2455, 2456, 2457, 2458, 2459, 2460, 2461, 2462, 2463, 2464, 2465, 2466, 2467, 2468, 2469, 2470, 2471, 2472, 2473, 2474, 2475, 2476, 2477, 2478, 2479, 2480, 2481, 2482, 2483, 2484, 2485, 2486, 2487, 2488, 2489, 2490, 2491, 2492, 2493, 2494, 2495, 2496, 2497, 2498, 2499, 2500, 2501, 2502, 2503, 2504, 2505, 2506, 2507, 2508, 2509, 2510, 2511, 2512, 2513, 2514, 2515, 2516, 2517, 2518, 2519, 2520, 2521, 2522, 2523, 2524, 2525, 2526, 2527, 2528, 2529, 2530, 2531, 2532, 2533, 2534, 2535, 2536, 2537, 2538, 2539, 2540, 2541, 2542, 2543, 2544, 2545, 2546, 2547, 2548, 2549, 2550, 2551, 2552, 2553, 2554, 2555, 2556, 2557, 2558, 2559, 2560, 2561, 2562, 2563, 2564, 2565, 2566, 2567, 2568, 2569, 2570, 2571, 2572, 2573, 2574, 2575, 2576, 2577, 2578, 2579, 2580, 2581, 2582, 2583, 2584, 2585, 2586, 2587, 2588, 2589, 2590, 2591, 2592, 2593, 2594, 2595, 2596, 2597, 2598, 2599, 2600, 2601, 2602, 2603, 2604, 2605, 2606, 2607, 2608, 2609, 2610, 2611, 2612, 2613, 2614, 2615, 2616, 2617, 2618, 2619, 2620, 2621, 2622, 2623, 2624, 2625, 2626, 2627, 2628, 2629, 2630, 2631, 2632, 2633, 2634, 2635, 2636, 2637, 2638, 2639, 2640, 2641, 2642, 2643, 2644, 2645, 2646, 2647, 2648, 2649, 2650, 2651, 2652, 2653, 2654, 2655, 2656, 2657, 2658, 2659, 2660, 2661, 2662, 2663, 2664, 2665, 2666, 2667, 2668, 2669, 2670, 2671, 2672, 2673, 2674, 2675, 2676, 2677, 2678, 2679, 2680, 26

1. **Einleitung**  
 2. **Ziele und Zwecksetzung**  
 3. **Methodik**  
 4. **Ergebnisse**  
 5. **Diskussion**  
 6. **Fazit**  
 7. **Literaturverzeichnis**  
 8. **Anhang**  
 9. **Index**  
 10. **Abbildung**  
 11. **Tabelle**  
 12. **Formel**  
 13. **Diagramm**  
 14. **Skizze**  
 15. **Zeichnung**  
 16. **Bild**  
 17. **Abbildung**  
 18. **Tabelle**  
 19. **Formel**  
 20. **Diagramm**  
 21. **Skizze**  
 22. **Zeichnung**  
 23. **Bild**  
 24. **Abbildung**  
 25. **Tabelle**  
 26. **Formel**  
 27. **Diagramm**  
 28. **Skizze**  
 29. **Zeichnung**  
 30. **Bild**  
 31. **Abbildung**  
 32. **Tabelle**  
 33. **Formel**  
 34. **Diagramm**  
 35. **Skizze**  
 36. **Zeichnung**  
 37. **Bild**  
 38. **Abbildung**  
 39. **Tabelle**  
 40. **Formel**  
 41. **Diagramm**  
 42. **Skizze**  
 43. **Zeichnung**  
 44. **Bild**  
 45. **Abbildung**  
 46. **Tabelle**  
 47. **Formel**  
 48. **Diagramm**  
 49. **Skizze**  
 50. **Zeichnung**  
 51. **Bild**  
 52. **Abbildung**  
 53. **Tabelle**  
 54. **Formel**  
 55. **Diagramm**  
 56. **Skizze**  
 57. **Zeichnung**  
 58. **Bild**  
 59. **Abbildung**  
 60. **Tabelle**  
 61. **Formel**  
 62. **Diagramm**  
 63. **Skizze**  
 64. **Zeichnung**  
 65. **Bild**  
 66. **Abbildung**  
 67. **Tabelle**  
 68. **Formel**  
 69. **Diagramm**  
 70. **Skizze**  
 71. **Zeichnung**  
 72. **Bild**  
 73. **Abbildung**  
 74. **Tabelle**  
 75. **Formel**  
 76. **Diagramm**  
 77. **Skizze**  
 78. **Zeichnung**  
 79. **Bild**  
 80. **Abbildung**  
 81. **Tabelle**  
 82. **Formel**  
 83. **Diagramm**  
 84. **Skizze**  
 85. **Zeichnung**  
 86. **Bild**  
 87. **Abbildung**  
 88. **Tabelle**  
 89. **Formel**  
 90. **Diagramm**  
 91. **Skizze**  
 92. **Zeichnung**  
 93. **Bild**  
 94. **Abbildung**  
 95. **Tabelle**  
 96. **Formel**  
 97. **Diagramm**  
 98. **Skizze**  
 99. **Zeichnung**  
 100. **Bild**  
 101. **Abbildung**  
 102. **Tabelle**  
 103. **Formel**  
 104. **Diagramm**  
 105. **Skizze**  
 106. **Zeichnung**  
 107. **Bild**  
 108. **Abbildung**  
 109. **Tabelle**  
 110. **Formel**  
 111. **Diagramm**  
 112. **Skizze**  
 113. **Zeichnung**  
 114. **Bild**  
 115. **Abbildung**  
 116. **Tabelle**  
 117. **Formel**  
 118. **Diagramm**  
 119. **Skizze**  
 120. **Zeichnung**  
 121. **Bild**  
 122. **Abbildung**  
 123. **Tabelle**  
 124. **Formel**  
 125. **Diagramm**  
 126. **Skizze**  
 127. **Zeichnung**  
 128. **Bild**  
 129. **Abbildung**  
 130. **Tabelle**  
 131. **Formel**  
 132. **Diagramm**  
 133. **Skizze**  
 134. **Zeichnung**  
 135. **Bild**  
 136. **Abbildung**  
 137. **Tabelle**  
 138. **Formel**  
 139. **Diagramm**  
 140. **Skizze**  
 141. **Zeichnung**  
 142. **Bild**  
 143. **Abbildung**  
 144. **Tabelle**  
 145. **Formel**  
 146. **Diagramm**  
 147. **Skizze**  
 148. **Zeichnung**  
 149. **Bild**  
 150. **Abbildung**  
 151. **Tabelle**  
 152. **Formel**  
 153. **Diagramm**  
 154. **Skizze**  
 155. **Zeichnung**  
 156. **Bild**  
 157. **Abbildung**  
 158. **Tabelle**  
 159. **Formel**  
 160. **Diagramm**  
 161. **Skizze**  
 162. **Zeichnung**  
 163. **Bild**  
 164. **Abbildung**  
 165. **Tabelle**  
 166. **Formel**  
 167. **Diagramm**  
 168. **Skizze**  
 169. **Zeichnung**  
 170. **Bild**  
 171. **Abbildung**  
 172. **Tabelle**  
 173. **Formel**  
 174. **Diagramm**  
 175. **Skizze**  
 176. **Zeichnung**  
 177. **Bild**  
 178. **Abbildung**  
 179. **Tabelle**  
 180. **Formel**  
 181. **Diagramm**  
 182. **Skizze**  
 183. **Zeichnung**  
 184. **Bild**  
 185. **Abbildung**  
 186. **Tabelle**  
 187. **Formel**  
 188. **Diagramm**  
 189. **Skizze**  
 190. **Zeichnung**  
 191. **Bild**  
 192. **Abbildung**  
 193. **Tabelle**  
 194. **Formel**  
 195. **Diagramm**  
 196. **Skizze**  
 197. **Zeichnung**  
 198. **Bild**  
 199. **Abbildung**  
 200. **Tabelle**  
 201. **Formel**  
 202. **Diagramm**  
 203. **Skizze**  
 204. **Zeichnung**  
 205. **Bild**  
 206. **Abbildung**  
 207. **Tabelle**  
 208. **Formel**  
 209. **Diagramm**  
 210. **Skizze**  
 211. **Zeichnung**  
 212. **Bild**  
 213. **Abbildung**  
 214. **Tabelle**  
 215. **Formel**  
 216. **Diagramm**  
 217. **Skizze**  
 218. **Zeichnung**  
 219. **Bild**  
 220. **Abbildung**  
 221. **Tabelle**  
 222. **Formel**  
 223. **Diagramm**  
 224. **Skizze**  
 225. **Zeichnung**  
 226. **Bild**  
 227. **Abbildung**  
 228. **Tabelle**  
 229. **Formel**  
 230. **Diagramm**  
 231. **Skizze**  
 232. **Zeichnung**  
 233. **Bild**  
 234. **Abbildung**  
 235. **Tabelle**  
 236. **Formel**  
 237. **Diagramm**  
 238. **Skizze**  
 239. **Zeichnung**  
 240. **Bild**  
 241. **Abbildung**  
 242. **Tabelle**  
 243. **Formel**  
 244. **Diagramm**  
 245. **Skizze**  
 246. **Zeichnung**  
 247. **Bild**

[illegible]

The government's policy of repression, as stated, also prevented the gathering of the people's opinion and the development of a strong, unified, and effective resistance movement. The government's policy of repression, as stated, also prevented the gathering of the people's opinion and the development of a strong, unified, and effective resistance movement. The government's policy of repression, as stated, also prevented the gathering of the people's opinion and the development of a strong, unified, and effective resistance movement.

[illegible]





For Lacan, the child's acquisition of language means a number of important things. He refers to the child's acquisition of language as its initiation into the Symbolic Order, the language is first and foremost a symbolic system of signification, that is, a symbolic system of meaning-making. Among the first meanings we make—or more correctly, that are made for us—are that I am a separate being ("I" am "me," not "you") and that I have a gender (I am a girl, not a boy, or vice versa). Our entrance into the Symbolic Order thus involves the experience of separation from others, and the biggest separation is the separation from the intimate union we experienced with our mother during our immaturity, the Imaginary Order. For Lacan, this separation constitutes our most important experience of loss, and it is one that will haunt us all our lives. We will use substitutes great and small for that lost union with our mother. We will spend our lives unconsciously pursuing it in the Symbolic Order—maybe I'll recapture that feeling of union if I find the perfect mate; if I acquire more money; if I convert to a different religion; if I become better looking; if I become more popular; or if I buy a flashier car, a bigger house, or whatever the Symbolic Order tells me I should want—but we will never be able to sustain a feeling of complete fulfillment. Why? Lacan explains that it's because the kind of fulfillment we seek, though we don't realize that we're seeking it, is that feeling of completeness, plenitude, and union with our mother/our world that disappeared from conscious experience when we entered the Symbolic Order, that is, when we acquired language.

Lacan refers to this lost object of desire as *objet petit a*, or "object small a," with the letter a standing for *autre*, the French word for *other*. Lacan scholars offer various reasons for Lacan's use of this particular piece of formulaic shorthand. One useful explanation might be that, in separating us from our preverbal world of idealized union with our mother, the Symbolic Order changed our mother into an other (someone separate from me) just as it changed everything else in our preverbal world of union into a world of people and things separate from ourselves. Why a small a (*autre*: other) instead of the capitalized *Other* Lacan uses, as we'll discuss shortly, to refer to a particular quality of the Symbolic Order? Perhaps it's because our relationship to our *objet petit a*, to our lost object of desire, is so personal, so individual, so utterly private, whereas our experiences in the Symbolic Order are not. *Objet petit a* is the "little other" that belongs only to me, that influences only me. As we'll see, *Other* with a capital O, in contrast, influences everyone.

It is important to note that *objet petit a* also refers to anything that puts me in touch with my repressed desire for my lost object. For example, when the narrator of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1954) tastes for the first time since childhood a small teacake called a *madeleine*, he experiences a joyful regression to his early youth. He is flooded with unexpected and vivid memories

For him, the *madeleine* is *objet petit a*. For *The Great Gatsby's* Jay Gatsby, perhaps the green light at the end of Daisy's dock is *objet petit a*, for one might argue that the light holds for Gatsby not just the promise of Daisy, but the promise of a return to his innocent youth, a return to a time before he was disappointed and corrupted by life. As these examples illustrate, although the lost object of desire is, literally, our preverbal fantasy union with our mother, there can be events or even whole periods of time later in our youth that we unconsciously associate with that fantasy union, that are stand-ins for it, and that we therefore respond to as lost objects of desire.

The importance of loss and lack in Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot be stressed too strongly. The use of language in general, in fact, implies a loss, a lack, because I wouldn't need words as stand-ins for things if I still felt that I was an inseparable part of those things. For example, I need the word *blanket* as a stand-in for my blanket precisely because I no longer have my former experience of my blanket. If I felt that my blanket and myself were still in union, were still one and the same thing, I wouldn't need the word *blanket* to refer to it. Thus, the Symbolic Order, or the world known through language, ushers in the world of lack. I am no longer one with my blanket, my mother, my world. So I need words to represent my concepts of these things.

In addition, the Symbolic Order, as a result of the experience of lack just described, marks the split into conscious and unconscious mind. In fact, the unconscious is created by our initial repression of our desire for the union with our mother we felt we had prior to the advent of the Symbolic Order. For the lack we experienced was repressed—our overwhelming sense of loss, our frustrated desire, our guilt over having certain kinds of desire, and the fears that accompany a loss of such magnitude—and as we learned earlier in this chapter, it is repression that first creates the unconscious. Indeed, Lacan's famous statement that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Seminar, Bk. VII 12) implies, among other things, the way in which unconscious desire is always seeking our lost object of desire, the fantasy mother of our preverbal experience, just as language is always seeking ways to put into words the world of objects we inhabit as adults, objects that didn't need words when we felt, as preverbal infants, one with them.

The unconscious is also structured like a language in another way that involves loss or lack. For Lacan argues that the operations of the unconscious resemble two very common processes of language that imply a kind of loss or lack: metaphor and metonymy. Now stay with me here. This argument is less dry and more clever than you might expect. Metaphors occur in language when one object is used as a stand-in for another, dissimilar object to which we want to nevertheless compare it. A red rose, for example, can be a metaphor for my love

if I want to suggest that, despite their obvious dissimilarities, my love has the qualities of a red rose: striking beauty, softness to the touch, the ability to hurt me (a rose has thorns, after all), and so forth. Metonymy occurs in language when an object associated with or part of another object is used as a stand-in for the whole object. For instance, I might say, "I think the crown should be expected to behave better" to indicate that I do not approve of something the king has done, with *crown* as the metonym for *king* because it is associated with the latter. Note that both metaphor and metonymy involve an absence, a kind of loss or lack: they're both stand-ins for something being pushed aside, so to speak. The qualities of the rose and the function of the crown are momentarily foregrounded here: the metaphor and the metonym occupy the stage, not the individuals whom these figures of speech represent.

Metaphor, Lacan observes, is akin to the unconscious process called *condensation* because both processes bring dissimilar things together. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the section entitled "Dreams and Dream Symbols," condensation occurs when we substitute a person or object for several dissimilar persons or objects, which are thus "brought together." For example, I might dream I am being pursued by a hungry lion when it is actually my creditors, my disgruntled spouse, and my dissatisfied employer that are all upsetting me. Analogously, metonymy is akin to the unconscious process of *displacement* because both processes substitute a person or object for another person or object with which the first is, in some way, associated. As described in the previous sections entitled "The Defenses, Anxiety, and Core Issues" and "Dreams and Dream Symbols," displacement occurs when we substitute a less threatening person or object for the person or object that is actually distressing us. For instance, I might yell at my child (someone who is "under" me) when it is actually my employer (someone I am "under") with whom I'm angry.

In all of these examples of the ways in which the unconscious is structured like a language, note that the key ingredient is loss or lack. In our recent examples, one thing is always being substituted for another that gets pushed into the background. In our earlier example, something lost is always being pursued but is never found. Thus, in entering the Symbolic Order—the world of language—we're entering a world of loss and lack. We've exited the Imaginary Order, the world in which we had the illusion of fulfillment and control. We now inhabit a world in which others have needs, desires, and fears that limit the ways in which and the extent to which we can attend to our own needs, desires, and fears. There is no more illusion of sustained fulfillment here, no more comforting fantasy of complete control. This new world is one in which there are rules we must obey and restrictions by which we must abide.

The first rule, according to Lacan, is the rule that Mother belongs to Father and not to me. For little boys, at least, this initiation into the Symbolic Order is what Freud calls the oedipal prohibition. Junior must find substitutes for Mother because she is no longer his alone. In fact, because she is Father's, she is no longer Junior's at all. It should come as no surprise, then, that Lacan says the Symbolic Order marks the replacement of the Desire of the Mother with the *Name-of-the-Father*. For it is through language that we are socially programmed, that we learn the rules and prohibitions of our society, and those rules and prohibitions were and still are authored by the Father, that is, by men in authority past and present. Indeed, the phallus (the symbolic equivalent of the penis and therefore a metaphor for patriarchal power) ironically holds the promise of complete power yet is the sign of lack because it is the sign of the Symbolic Order. And Lacan's pun on the Name-of-the-Father (in French, the Name-of-the-Father is the *Nom-du-Père*, which is a pun on the *Non*—or *No*—*du Père*: the "No"-of-the-Father) underscores the restrictive dimension of the Symbolic Order.

So enormous is the role of the Symbolic Order in the formation of what we refer to as our "selves," in fact, that we are not the unique, independent individuals we think we are. Our desires, beliefs, biases, and so forth are constructed for us as a result of our immersion in the Symbolic Order, especially as that immersion is carried out by our parents and influenced by their own responses to the Symbolic Order. This is what Lacan means by his claim that "desire is always the desire of the Other" (*Seminar, Bk. XI* 235). We may think that what we want out of life, or even what we want at any given moment, is the result of our own unique personalities, our own wills and judgments. However, what we desire is what we are taught to desire. If we were raised in a different culture—that is, in a different Symbolic Order—we would have different desires. In other words, the Symbolic Order consists of society's ideologies: its beliefs, values, and biases; its system of government, laws, educational practices, religious tenets, and the like. And it is our responses to our society's ideologies that make us who we are. This is what Lacan means when he capitalizes the word *other* when discussing the Symbolic Order. *Other* refers to anything that contributes to the creation of our subjectivity, or what we commonly refer to as our "selfhood": for example, the Symbolic Order, language, ideology—which are virtually synonymous—or any authority figure or accepted social practice.

It is important to note, however, that in repressing, in rendering unconscious, our desire for the world of our preverbal childhood—the world in which we had the illusion of fulfillment and control, the world in which we believed Mother lived for us alone—we are not repressing the Imaginary Order. Rather, the Imaginary Order continues to exist in the background of consciousness even as the Symbolic Order holds sway in the foreground. The Symbolic Order dominates human culture and social order, for to remain solely in the Imaginary Order is to

render oneself incapable of functioning in society. Nevertheless, the Imaginary Order makes itself felt through experiences of the kind the Symbolic Order would classify as misinterpretations, misunderstandings, or errors of perception. That is, the Imaginary Order makes itself felt through any experience or view-point that does not conform adequately to the societal norms and expectations that constitute the Symbolic Order. Yet in this capacity, the Imaginary Order is also a fertile source of creativity without which we probably wouldn't recognize ourselves as fully human. One might even argue that the profound value of the Imaginary Order lies in the very fact of its not controlling our lives the way the Symbolic Order does. Ironically, it is this "lack" of control that probably offers us the only resistance we have to the ideological systems that constitute the Symbolic Order. Nevertheless, Lacan posits that both the Symbolic and the Imaginary Orders attempt to control or avoid what he calls the Real.

Lacan's notion of the Real is a very difficult concept that he had trouble explaining. One way to think of the Real is as that which is beyond all our meaning-making systems, that which lies outside the world created by the ideologies society uses to explain existence. That is, the Real is the uninterpretable dimension of existence; it is existence without the filters and buffers of our signifying or meaning-making systems. For example, the Real is that experience we have, perhaps on a daily basis even if it's only for a moment, when we feel that there is no purpose or meaning to life, when we suspect that religion and any or all of the rules that govern society are hoaxes or mistakes or the results of chance. In other words, we experience the Real when we have a moment in which we see through ideology, when we realize that it is ideology—and not some set of timeless values or eternal truths—that has made the world as we know it. We sense that ideology is like a curtain upon which our whole world is embroidered, and we know that behind that curtain is the Real. But we can't see behind the curtain. The Real is something we can know nothing about, except to have the anxious feeling from time to time that it's there. That's why Lacan calls this kind of experience the *trauma of the Real*. It terrifies us because it tells us that the meanings society has created for us are just that—the creations of society—but it gives us nothing in place of those meanings. The trauma of the Real gives us only the realization that the reality hidden beneath the ideologies society has created is a reality beyond our capacity to know and explain and therefore certainly beyond our capacity to control.

Okay, if you've hung on this far, you must be asking, "What does all this have to do with literary interpretation?" Given that Lacanian literary interpretation is quite different from the more standard, or classical, psychoanalytic approach to literature that we address in the rest of this chapter, it might be a good idea just to become generally acquainted with the kinds of literary analysis done by Lacanian literary critics. Our goal here is not to enable you to do a Lacanian

analysis yourself but simply to familiarize you with this kind of interpretation so that you'll be more comfortable and knowledgeable when you read Lacanian literary interpretations and, when you're ready, try one yourself.

Perhaps the most reliable way to interpret a literary work through a Lacanian lens, especially when you first try the approach, is to explore the ways in which the text might be structured by some of the key Lacanian concepts we've just discussed and see what this exploration can reveal. For example, do any characters, events, or episodes in the narrative seem to embody the Imaginary Order, in which case they would involve some kind of private and either fantasy or delusional world? What parts of the text seem informed by the Symbolic Order? That is, where do we see ideology and social norms in control of characters' behavior and narrative events? How is the relationship between these two orders portrayed? What do we learn about characters if we can discover where they've invested their unconscious desire for *objet petit a*? In other words, where has a given character placed (or displaced, to be more precise) his or her unconscious desire for the haunting, idealized mother of infancy? Does any part of the text seem to operate as a representative of the Real, of that dimension of existence that remains so terrifyingly beyond our ability to comprehend it that our impulse is to flee it, to repress and deny it?

Let's look briefly at two literary examples. First, I'm sure many of you have read the frequently anthologized story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman entitled "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). In what way might we say that the story's unnamed narrator spends more and more time in the Imaginary Order until she, in effect, lives there entirely? How is her recourse to the Imaginary Order a rejection of the Symbolic Order, which is evidently embodied in her husband and brother? How might the wallpaper be seen as a representation of the Lacanian Real? How do the narrator's encounters with the wallpaper illustrate the trauma of the Real? Might we be justified in hypothesizing that "The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrates a situation in which a character finds herself caught between a Lacanian rock and a hard place, so to speak, in that she's caught between two unlivable alternatives: a Symbolic Order she finds too restrictive and the incomprehensible Real? The only position left her, to which she gradually becomes acclimated and which she finally inhabits entirely, is the Imaginary Order. Indeed, the story ends with the protagonist crawling around the room like a very young child, unable to function as a member of society, which Lacanian theory tells us is always the result of total immersion in the Imaginary Order.

For our second brief example, let's try Kate Chopin's frequently anthologized novella *The Awakening* (1899). Here again, we have a female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, who is drawn to the Imaginary Order: in her case, the world of art, music, sexual freedom, and romance. She is drawn to the Imaginary Order partly

Big A influences everyone like a personal justice

what is like person



in response to the emotionally distant father and older sister who raised her and partly in response to her husband Léonce, who is so thoroughly bound to the Symbolic Order that he is practically its poster child. However, Edna is also drawn to the Imaginary Order in search of something she can't identify. She is haunted by a longing that can't be satisfied, not by her art, not by Mademoiselle Reisz's music, not by her own sexual freedom, and not by romance. A Lacanian reader might say that Edna remains unsatisfied because she doesn't realize that art, music, sexual freedom, and romance are just her substitutes for *objet petit a*, the fantasy union with her mother/her world she experienced in infancy and still unconsciously desires. Indeed, we might argue that it is the strength of this unconscious desire that finally draws her, as naked as the day she was born, into her fatal union with the sea, where her last experiences are sensory, not verbal: memories of her youth: she hears the barking of a dog, the clanging of spurs, the hum of bees, and she smells the odor of flowers. In terms of Edna's experience, then, we might be justified in hypothesizing that *The Awakening* is structured by the protagonist's unconscious search for *objet petit a*, a search that is necessarily unsuccessful, for *objet petit a* is always a lost object that can never be found.

Of course, Lacanian psychoanalysis employs many more concepts and is much more complex than a brief summary like this can convey. Nevertheless, even these few theoretical concepts and literary examples can allow us to begin to understand the unique perspective on human experience and the interesting insights into literature Lacan offers us.

### Classical psychoanalysis and literature

Of course, there are also many more concepts in classical psychoanalysis than the ones discussed earlier. And as in every field, there is a good deal of disagreement among classical psychoanalytic theorists concerning, for example, the ways in which our personalities are formed and the best ways of treating dysfunctional behavior. Among psychoanalytic literary critics, there is much disagreement concerning how psychoanalytic concepts can best be applied to our study of literature. What role should an author's literary output play in our psychoanalysis of his or her life? To what extent is it legitimate to psychoanalyze literary characters as if they were real people? When doing so, which psychoanalytic theories are most useful?

some ways in which Marxism and feminism reject the psychoanalytic perspective. Our purpose at this point, however, is simply to cover the main ideas, the basic principles of psychoanalysis to which most other psychoanalytic concepts are in some way related in order to facilitate your reading of psychoanalytic theorists and literary critics with some understanding of the issues they raise.

It stands to reason that you won't find every psychoanalytic concept we've discussed represented in every literary work you read. Our job, when we read psychoanalytically, is to see which concepts are operating in the text in such a way as to enrich our understanding of the work and, if we plan to write a paper about it, to yield a meaningful, coherent psychoanalytic interpretation. From the perspective of classical psychoanalytic theory, which is our primary focus in this chapter, we might attend mainly to the work's representation of oedipal dynamics or of family dynamics in general; to what the work can tell us about human beings' psychological relationship to death or to sexuality; to the way the narrator's unconscious problems keep asserting themselves over the course of the story; or to any other psychoanalytic concepts that seem to produce a useful understanding of the text.

Some critics have objected to the use of psychoanalysis to understand the behavior of literary characters because literary characters are not real people and, therefore, do not have psyches that can be analyzed. However, psychoanalyzing the behavior of literary characters is probably the best way to learn how to use the theory. Furthermore, this practice has been defended by many psychoanalytic critics on two important grounds: (1) when we psychoanalyze literary characters, we are not suggesting that they are real people but that they represent the psychological experience of human beings in general; and (2) it is just as legitimate to psychoanalyze the behavior represented by literary characters as it is to analyze their behavior from a feminist, Marxist, or African American critical perspective, or from the perspective of any critical theory that analyzes literary representations as illustrations of real-life issues.

Let's look at a few specific examples to see the kinds of insights produced by using classical psychoanalysis to interpret the behavior represented by literary characters. A psychoanalytic reading of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) might examine the ways in which Willy Loman's flashbacks to the past are really regressive episodes brought on by his present psychological trauma: his own

might be read as an exploration of the psychological dynamics of the family: an exploration of the ways in which unresolved conflicts about our roles within the family are "played out" in the workplace and "passed down" to our children.

Similarly, a psychoanalytic reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1957) might analyze the ways in which the novel reveals the debilitating psychological effects of racism, especially when these effects are internalized by its victims, which we see in the belief of many of the black characters that their race has the negative qualities ascribed to it by white America. These psychological effects are evident, for example, in the Breedloves' conviction that they are ugly simply because they have African features; in Mrs. Breedlove's devotion to the white family for whom she works, while she neglects her own family; in the self-hatred of the young black boys who mercilessly pick on Pecola for having black skin; in the assumption by black characters as well as white that Maureen Peal, a lighter-skinned African American girl, is superior in every way to her darker-skinned classmates; and in Geraldine's inability to relax and enjoy her life or let herself love her husband and son because she fears that the slightest loss of control (whether it be the control of her emotions or of her hair's natural curl) will make her a "nigger," as she calls any black person who does not conform to her standard of dress and behavior. As these examples illustrate, the novel shows how internalized racism results in self-contempt on the part of the black characters and in a projection of that self-hatred onto other members of their race. We see particularly damaging forms of this projection in much of the black characters' treatment of Pecola, whose self-negating desire for blue eyes is the most striking illustration of the psychological destructiveness of racism. Or we might use psychoanalysis to understand the ways in which the Breedloves illustrate the dynamics of the dysfunctional family, the roots of which can be seen in Pauline and Cholly's youthful experiences of isolation, abandonment, and betrayal.

Finally, a psychoanalytic reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) might reveal the ways in which Victor's creation of a monster responsible for the death of his family and friends serves his unconscious need to punish his father and mother (for whom Elizabeth is an obvious surrogate) and play out the intense unresolved sibling rivalry created by their adoption of Elizabeth, the "perfect" child, when Victor was five years old. The total absence of any normal childhood jealousy on Victor's part, coupled with his frequent protestations of love for the newcomer who dethroned him as the sole object of parental attention and affection, suggest the repression of feelings of abandonment that, because they are kept in the unconscious, are never resolved. We see numerous signs of these unresolved conflicts in Victor's adult life, for example, in his failure to mention subsequent siblings during the narrative of his childhood with Elizabeth and learn of their existence through Elizabeth's letter to him at the university or his extremely prolonged absence from his beloved family, including Elizabeth

to whom he is betrothed; in the dream sequence that reveals his psychological merger of Elizabeth and his dead mother and foreshadows the former's death; in his fits of feverish disorientation, which read like dream sequences and include frequent expressions of fear that he is losing his mind or protestations that he is perfectly sane; and in the uncanny way he seems to always make exactly the right move to facilitate the monster's next murder. Furthermore, we might cautiously speculate on the relationship between the representation of psychological abandonment in the novel and the experiences of abandonment Mary Shelley apparently suffered in her own life: her mother died shortly after Mary was born; her father found single parenthood more than he could handle; and the woman her father subsequently wed neglected Mary in favor of her own daughter by a previous marriage.

This might be a good place to pause and answer a frequently asked question concerning psychoanalytic readings of literary works: if we find psychoanalytic concepts operating in a literary text, does it mean that the author has deliberately put them there, and how can an author put them there if he or she lived before Freud or never heard of him? The answer is simple: Freud didn't invent psychoanalytic principles; he discovered them operating in human beings. In other words, Freud named and explained principles of human behavior that were present long before he found them and that would be present even if he didn't describe them. So any literary text that accurately describes human behavior or that is the product of an author's unconscious (which we presume all creative works are to some extent) will include psychoanalytic principles whether or not the author had any awareness of those principles when writing the work. For psychoanalysis, literature, and indeed all art forms, are largely products of unconscious forces at work in the author, in the reader, or, for some contemporary psychoanalytic critics, in our society as a whole.

Our use of psychoanalytic concepts is not limited to one literary genre or to one artistic medium; we can use psychoanalytic criticism to read works of fiction, poetry, drama, folklore, and nonfiction, and we can use it to interpret paintings, sculptures, architecture, films, and music. Any human production that involves images, that seems to have narrative content (the way many paintings seem to tell a story), or that relates to the psychology of those who produce or use it (which means just about everything!) can be interpreted using psychoanalytic tools.

### Some questions psychoanalytic critics ask about literary texts

The following questions are offered to summarize psychoanalytic approaches to literature. Whatever approach you use, it is customary to note that the psychoanalytic dimension of the text you examine helps drive the narrative (as

responsible for a good deal of the plot). Question 7 offers a specifically Lacanian approach to literature.

1. How do the operations of repression structure or inform the work? That is, what unconscious motives are operating in the main character(s); what core issues are thereby illustrated; and how do these core issues structure or inform the piece? (Remember, the unconscious consists of repressed wounds, fears, unresolved conflicts, and guilty desires.)
2. Are there any oedipal dynamics—or any other family dynamics—at work here? That is, is it possible to relate a character's patterns of adult behavior to early experiences in the family as represented in the story? How do these patterns of behavior and family dynamics operate and what do they reveal?
3. How can characters' behavior, narrative events, and/or images be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (for example, regression, crisis, projection, fear of or fascination with death, sexuality—which includes love and romance as well as sexual behavior—as a primary indicator of psychological identity, or the operations of ego-id-superego)?
4. In what ways can we view a literary work as analogous to a dream? That is, how might recurrent or striking dream symbols reveal the ways in which the narrator or speaker is projecting his or her unconscious desires, fears, wounds, or unresolved conflicts onto other characters, onto the setting, or onto the events portrayed? Symbols relevant to death, sexuality, and the unconscious are especially helpful. Indeed, the use of dream symbols can be very useful in interpreting literary works, or passages thereof, that seem unrealistic or fantastic, in other words, that seem dreamlike.
5. What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author? Although this question is no longer the primary question asked by psychoanalytic critics, some critics still address it, especially those who write psychological biographies (psychobiographies). In these cases, the literary text is interpreted much as if it were the author's dream. Psychoanalyzing an author in this manner is a difficult undertaking, and our analysis must be carefully derived by examining the author's entire corpus as well as letters, diaries, and any other biographical material available. Certainly, a single literary work can provide but a very incomplete picture.
6. What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader? Or what might a critical trend suggest about the psychological motives of a group of readers (for example, the tendency of literary critics to see Willy Loman as a devoted family man and ignore or underplay his contribution to the family dysfunction)?
7. In what ways does the text seem to reveal characters' emotional investments in the Symbolic Order, the Imaginary Order, the Mirror Stage, or what Lacan calls *objet petit a*? Does any part of the text seem to represent Lacan's notion

of the Real? Do any Lacanian concepts account for so much of the text that we might say the text is structured by one or more of these concepts?

Depending on the literary work in question, we might ask one or any combination of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful question not listed here. These are just some starting points to get us thinking about literary works in productive psychoanalytic ways. It is important to keep in mind that not all psychoanalytic critics will interpret the same work in the same way, even if they focus on the same psychoanalytic concepts. As in every field, even expert practitioners disagree. Our goal is to use psychoanalysis to help enrich our reading of literary works, to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without psychoanalysis.

The following psychoanalytic reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a psychoanalytic interpretation of that novel might yield. I will argue that fear of intimacy forms a pattern of psychological behavior that is common to all of the novel's main characters and responsible for a good deal of the narrative progression. Through a psychoanalytic lens, then, *The Great Gatsby* is not the great love story that enralls so many of its readers, but a psychological drama of dysfunctional love.

#### "What's Love Got to Do with It?": a psychoanalytic reading of *The Great Gatsby*

One area of human behavior explored in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) that has important implications for psychoanalytic criticism is found in the romantic relationships portrayed in the novel. Indeed, even for readers not viewing the novel through a psychoanalytic lens, one of the most memorable qualities of the book is the force and endurance of Gatsby's love for Daisy, the emotional magnetism of which, for many fans, renders *The Great Gatsby* one of the great American love stories. For many nonpsychoanalytic literary critics, in fact, Jay Gatsby is a rather larger-than-life romantic hero,<sup>2</sup> quite different from the other characters portrayed in the novel. For a psychoanalytic reading, however, the interest created by the romance between Gatsby and Daisy lies not in its apparent uniqueness but in the ways in which it mirrors all of the less appealing romantic relationships depicted—those between Tom and Daisy, Tom and Myrtle, Myrtle and George, and Nick and Jordan—and thereby reveals a pattern of psychological behavior responsible for a good deal of the narrative progression. As we shall see, this pattern is grounded in the characters' fear of intimacy, the unconscious conviction that emotional ties to another human being will result in one's being emotionally devastated. This psychological problem is so pervasive in the novel that *The Great Gatsby*'s famous love story becomes,