

The Uncanny Study Guide

The Uncanny by Sigmund Freud

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Plot Summary

The *Uncanny* is a collection of essays by Sigmund Freud, who mostly uses the psychoanalytic approach to try and understand the creative mind. Some of the essays, most notably, "Screen Memories" and "Family Romances", are more general and apply to psychological development in general, not just to the development or minds of artists.

"Screen Memories" is that first memory and deals with pseudo memories of childhood that Freud calls "screen memories." A screen memory looks like a memory of childhood but is often too early to have actually been from childhood and often has features that make it seem like a fabrication rather than an actual memory. In the essay, Freud examines several different case studies to show the workings of "screen memories." In the next essay, "Creative Writing and Daydreaming," Freud looks at how the phenomenon of daydreaming is related to both the development of creative ideas for stories and to nocturnal dreaming. Most creative stories, Freud claims, are of the same form as daydreams and are similar to nocturnal dreams in that they show the ego living out fantasies that are not possible in regular, everyday life. The next essay "Family Romances" looks at the childhood development of the mind as the child develops sexual interest in his parents and family members while mentally maturing.

All of these essays so far are needed to understand the longest essay in the collection, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood." Freud looks at a memory of da Vinci's childhood involving a vulture to try to better understand the mind of the creative genius Leonardo da Vinci. Freud argues that Leonardo da Vinci's memory belies a strong sublimated sexual interest in his mother and a homosexual proclivity. By all accounts, Leonardo da Vinci was asexual, and hence his homosexual interest must have remained idealized rather than actualized. In explaining Leonardo da Vinci's memory as a screen memory, Freud must deploy many tools from his psychoanalytic arsenal to make sense of Leonardo da Vinci's strange memory. Even if Freud is wrong about Leonardo da Vinci's sexual urges and history with his father and mother, the essay is a fascinating look into the psychoanalytic method and the life of Leonardo da Vinci.

The final and title essay also looks at a phenomenon of literature through a psychoanalytic lens, the uncanny. The uncanny, at least in German, is closely related etymologically to its opposite, and Freud uses this linguistic relationship to argue that the uncanny is not something strange, but rather something familiar that has been repressed or changed in some way. We find ghosts or doubles to be uncanny and many men often find aspects of the female uncanny. There is a similarity to the subject in all of these things, but all also have an important difference that leads to them being uncanny. In this essay, Freud investigates many different forms of the uncanny to try to understand the root that links all of them in the mind of the person observing them.



Screen Memories

Screen Memories Summary and Analysis

The essay "Screen Memories" begins with a discussion of childhood memories. For Freud, the childhood is the essential, formative period in the development of the adult psyche. Freud claims, though, that the childhood memory and psyche are very different from the adult memory. It is not until the child is around six that their memories form a narrative pattern that is temporally connected. Because of this, Freud suggests that many of the childhood memories we recall as adults are not memories, but are in fact not memories at all. They are rather constructions of our unconscious. Our unconscious mind operates on different kinds of associations and analogies. A scene may be important because of its, seemingly, abstract association with some other important aspect of one's psychology, not because there is any direct connection between the scene and an important event.

Freud claims that most early childhood memories are from the age of between two and four. Most adult memories have some kind of strong emotional power; that is, they tend to be of events that were emotionally important. Not so with most early childhood memories. Our childhood memories tend to seem random or inconsequential. This fact leads Freud to believe that in this seeming irrelevance is hidden importance. Freud believes that two forces are at play in these early childhood memories, both triggered by emotional resonance. One is a motive for the unconscious to suppress or forget the event, the other is a force to remember the event. These two forces working together, lead to situation where the memory is preserved, but in a strange and distorted form. When a emotionally traumatic event occurs, conflict between the forces of repression and memory will begin until there is eventually a substitution of memory as a compromise between these forces.

Freud gives an example of this process from the case of V. and C. Henri. Henri tells Freud of his early childhood memory of playing with a young girl in a vibrant yellow dress until he and other boys went up to the girl and stole her flowers. The girl runs to her mother and then both the boys and the girl eat some bread from the mother, which Henri remembers as being delicious. Henri then goes on to tell Freud about another time when he was seventeen that he stayed in the countryside with a cousin, whom he fell in love with but could not pursue because of her class status. Freud suggests that it is this conflict from his adolescence, which is represented as a childhood memory. The little girl represents the cousin and stealing the flowers is a representation of "deflowering" or seducing the girl, while the bread represents the "daily bread" of earning a living, the reason why Henri originally could not be with the girl. Freud takes this example to be a general case of images represented as childhood memories that relate to important underlying psychological themes. Freud calls these memory-like episodes "screen memories." One of the key elements of a "screen memory" is banal content that has emotional resonance.



Creative Writing and Daydreaming

Creative Writing and Daydreaming Summary and Analysis

This essay begins as Freud's attempt to better understand the basis and genesis of the creative process. Freud argues that the creative process begins in play, especially as a child and then play becomes fantasy. Instead of pretending to live in castles, the mind begins to build castles in their mind. People fantasize about what they will do, often before an event. In the healthy person, these fantasies can help the person think through possibilities in the future, whereas, in the unhealthy person, fantasies can become neurotic or obsessional, ultimately collapsing into psychosis where the dreamer begins to live completely in their dreams. As in night dreams, in daydreams the ego has free reign, putting the dreamer in many different situations. Most heroes in fiction are really just ego projections as in a daydream, Freud argues. As with most projections of the unconscious into the conscious mind, as in dreams or fantasies or day dreams, the daydream is an attempt to live out a desire that has been hidden. These desires are hidden for various reasons, often complicated reasons that have to do with the developmental history of the subject. For whatever reason, though, the subconscious mind allows the suppressed desire to manifest in the conscious mind so long as it is disguised symbolically in the form of a dream. Usually this suppression is the result of some unknown conflict between our unconscious and conscious mind.

There is a pleasure in living out possibilities that would be denied to the daydreamer in real life and the artist uses this activity and sublimates the actual pleasure into the channel of artistic output. Our dreams at night are opportunities for our unconscious mind and our id to live out and fulfill the desires that were denied them in the daylight. Daydreams are similar, but their desires seem to be more acceptable. This essay is just the beginning of an investigation into the subject and Freud ends it abruptly.



Family Romances

Family Romances Summary and Analysis

A central theme of all of Freud's work is the conflict and relationships within the family. In this essay, Freud focuses on the development of basic romantic attachments and fantasies between children and family members, especially parents. As Freud says, the progress of civilization, history, is the process of one generation superseding another. Similarly, the process of growth of children in the family involves the desire of the children to supersede and overcome their parents. This developmental process follows several noticeable stages. In the first, the child feels that siblings or other people are taking love from his parents that should belong to the child alone. In this stage, the child will often fantasize that he or she is actually an adopted child or the child of adultery. In the next stage, which Freud calls the "family romance of the neurotics", the child daydreams or fantasizes about replacing his parents with other, better parents, often of a higher social standing. This phase also occurs while the child is still ignorant of the different roles that each parent plays in sexual reproduction. Once the child learns about the sexual differences between mother and father, the conflicts that are present in the earlier (asexual) stages take on a sexual nature. The child, if he is a boy, raises the father up to a higher level of prestige and imagines that the father is oppressing him in important ways, while at the same time, the child begins to fantasize about the mother sexually. If there is a sister in the family, the boy may fantasize about the mother engaging in extramarital affairs, which led to the birth of the sister. This may allow the brother to justify sexual fantasies about his sister while escaping the charge of incest.

Females have other, somewhat related but different familial fantasies. The obvious example of this type of family romance represented in literature is the example of Oedipus Rex from Sophocles. In that play, Oedipus, exiled from his family as a child, returns to his home city of Thebes as an adult to unwittingly kill his father and take his mother as a wife. Part of the interest in the Oedipus story, like family romances in general, is that they are hidden from the view of the normal observer. Oedipus commits his crime unknowingly and the child's desires are the result of the normal stage of mental and sexual maturation.

These fantasies, though they seem depraved, are really, so Freud argues, just the manifestation of the child's affection for his family and parents. The child loves his parents so much that he sees them, in his mind, as being the greatest of people. The mother is the most beautiful and nicest of women and the father is the strongest of men. As the child grows mentally, he learns the ugly truth that his mother and father are not the best people, and so the child tries to retain this image of his parents by creating a fantasy version of his parents. Later in life, as the adult grows, this image becomes the basis of dreams. Oftentimes, Freud argues, that dreams involving emperors or empresses are really dream representations of the parents. As with almost all of the fantasies of neurotics, the family romance fantasies are the attempt of the subconscious to reconcile the idolization and love of the parents that develops in early childhood with

the unwelcome truth that is gained in later adolescence. It is the mark of a neurotic that this reconciliation is not accomplished properly, which leads to psychological disorders.



Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood

Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood Summary and Analysis

"Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood" is one of the longest essays in this collection and is divided into six parts. Part I begins with a discussion of why the psychoanalysts should be interested in great representative types like great artists or great thinkers. Freud argues that the common man may be interested in the psychology of these great persons because they instinctively want to bring the great person down to their own level by investigating their psychology to show that it is really the same as the common man's. This sordid goal is, however, not Freud's goal. Rather, he wants to look at characters like da Vinci to discern important facts about human psychology by looking at the best human representatives. Da Vinci was great in many ways. He was a great artist and a great scientist. In an age where great men would do many things well, that is, in the age of "Renaissance Men", Leonardo da Vinci was an ideal type of this sort of person. Leonardo was known, even in his own time, however, as being unstable and melancholy. He would labor for months over a painting, only to lose interest in it later. As he developed more and more of an interest in science, his interest in art, his first love, also waned. His ideal of perfection was so high in his art that if he perceived one of his paintings as not meeting that high standard, he would discard it completely. This is what happened to one of his most famous, but unfinished paintings, the Mona Lisa. Da Vinci also differed from his contemporaries by seemingly not being interested in promoting his work. He was also a man full of contradictions. He was kind, but also exacting. He was meek and chose not to eat animals because of his desire not to kill even them unnecessarily but he also designed war machines and helped Cesare Borgia on one of his military expeditions. This contradiction led Freud to argue that Da Vinci was cool to the differences between good and evil.

He also seemed not to take any interest in women. Freud notes that this coolness towards women is all the more strange because he lived in a time of sensuality. Freud speculates that Da Vinci's interest in the perfect female form in art led him to devalue the actual female forms around him. Freud further speculates that it is unlikely that Da Vinci ever had sex with a woman. Some later biographers maintained that Da Vinci was actually gay, but Freud believes there is little evidence to support this claim. Freud believes that Da Vinci's notion of romantic love was so idealized that no human variety of love could ever come close to attaining that ideal, hence Da Vinci avoided live altogether. Because of this, Freud agrees with some others who have called Da Vinci the "Italian Faust"—a man so dedicated to knowledge that he sacrificed everything, including the possibility of love, for that knowledge. Two things resulted from this thrust for knowledge. The first was a sublimation of the sexual desire into the pursuit of



knowledge and the second was the pursuit of knowledge, originally as a supplement to Da Vinci's art, eventually taking over him completely.

Sexual sublimation, that is, the channeling of strong sexual energy into artistic or other creative pursuits, is the mark of great productive minds. Freud believes that this process was responsible for Da Vinci's great work as well as his lack of interest in love. Freud also believes that Da Vinci turned from art to science in an attempt to better his art. His initial interest in the science of light began as an attempt to improve his art scientifically, but over time, his interest in the pure scientific pursuit rose to such a level that his interest in art, originally the cause of his scientific pursuits, to become secondary. Da Vinci is, to Freud, then an exemplar of the type of person who successfully sublimates his sexual desire into artistic pursuits.

Section II begins with Freud discussing a childhood memory that Da Vinci mentions in his scientific writing. To Freud's knowledge, this is the only childhood memory that we find in his work. The memory is of a vulture opening up the baby Da Vinci's mouth while he was still in his cradle with the vulture's tail and the vulture smacking the baby several times with its tail against his lips. Freud thinks that his memory is so bizarre and unlikely that it must be what he has earlier called a "screen memory"—that is, a memory that is really a fantasy fabricated by the subconscious later in life to seem like a childhood memory. Freud believes that this memory can be easily analyzed. The tail, a symbol in many cultures including Italian, symbolizes the male penis. Freud speculates that the tail inside the mouth is a symbol of fellatio and that the fantasy is similar to some he has seen in women and some homosexuals. Freud thinks that the desire to suck on the male penis derives from the pleasing sensation we all had, as babies to suck on our mothers' nipples for milk. Later, that infantile desire is transferred in ways that relate to our overall sexual interest. Da Vinci's memory then is really a fantasy of suckling on his mother's breast that has been transformed into a homosexual fantasy. This memory then, substantiates the traditional charge that Leonardo was a homosexual. Still, why is the mother represented as a vulture in this memory? In ancient Egypt, the mother is often represented as a vulture. It is possible that Leonardo knew the Egyptian imagery or that the Egyptian imagery is related to deep tendencies in our unconscious minds. Because of the complexity of the symbol and its later relation to Christian thought, Freud believes that Da Vinci must have been familiar with the Egyptian symbolism of the vulture as mother. The vulture symbol in Egypt was also connected to virgin birth because the Egyptians believed that all vultures were females. Freud suggests then that the memory makes Da Vinci into a symbolic Christ, who is the child of a virgin birth by a vulture. This interpretation gains importance once we learn that Leonardo was an illegitimate child only much later and only half-heartedly embraced by his natural father.

Section III begins with Freud doubting his interpretation. If the vulture really does represent the mother, then how can we interpret the tail as a symbolic penis? The Egyptian goddess Mut is presented with the head of a vulture and a male phallus. Freud believes that this strange hermaphrodism is related to the development of childhood sexual ideas. The boy, beginning to understand the nature of sexuality and discovering his own genitals, naturally believes that females have his genitals too. Once finding out that girls do not have a penis, the child begins to speculate that they once had a penis,



but that it was cut off. This leads him to fear castration of his own penis by females and to fear females whom he believes have already met with the unfortunate fate of castration. Males who are fascinated and long for women's feet are searching for the female penis that they later found was not present. Freud blames these strange views on a culture that has denigrated the genitals, in contrast to the ancient cultures that saw the genitals as the fount of all life and hence revered them. Freud suspects that Leonardo, like most homosexuals, had an intense identification with his mother while younger and as he grew began to identify himself more and more in the role of his mother, looking at younger boys as substitutes for himself, sexually performing a kind of psychological auto-eroticism.

Freud begins Section IV by highlighting the sexual nature of Leonardo's memory. He comments on the sexual nature of the vulture smacking its tail on the lips of the child. This leads Freud to suggest that there is a connection between Leonardo's fascination with lips in his memory and the strange quality that many of Leonard's paintings have in their lips, the most notably being the Mona Lisa. By looking at many of Leonardo's paintings and seeing the prevalence of both the enigmatic smile and the presence of babies, Freud concludes that the baby represents Leonardo and the woman smiling represents Leonardo's loving mother. Because, presumably, of his childhood experience, Leonardo was unable to fully love an adult woman, and we see this desire sublimated in his artistic expression.

Section V begins with Freud noting a strange repetition of the time of Leonardo's estranged father's death in his notebooks. For Freud, any repetition or strange forgetting belies an unconscious source. Freud also mentions the relationship that Leonardo had with his father as being related to Leonardo's views about God. For Freud, God is merely an exalted, idealized father figure. Leonardo, who had never known his father and had lived without him, has removed the need for both his actual father and the idealized father figure in the form of God. Freud relates this to Leonardo's desire to fly and the common wish of many dreamers to fly. In many languages, the word for fly or bird is related to the word for the male sexual organ. Children desire to become adults and one of these desires is the desire for full adult sexuality, often represented as a desire to fly.

In Section VI, Freud defends his psychological investigation of Leonardo. It is not, Freud argues, to take away from the greatness of the man to understand his psychological development. In conclusion, Freud argues that Leonardo's lack of a father and excessive motherly love led to his development of an idealized sexuality that was mostly sublimated into his scientific work, but that also had a homosexual element.



The Uncanny

The Uncanny Summary and Analysis

This essay is divided into several parts. In the first part, Freud explains the subject of the essay, namely the uncanny. The uncanny is frightening to us; allow it is hard to define precisely. The uncanny or the eerie is the species of frightening things that evokes something familiar. This understanding, however, seems at odds with both the normal use of the term and the linguistic roots of the uncanny, which are mostly related to foreign or alien things. Through detailed analysis of the German roots of the word, however, Freud believes he can show that the uncanny is actually more related to the familiar than to the unfamiliar.

In section II, Freud gives an example of the uncanny that makes sense of his connection of the idea with the familiar. One thing we tend to find uncanny is a doll or robot that looks strikingly human. Another example is humans that seem uncanny because they are in a fit of insanity or an epileptic seizure. Freud then gives a long example of one of his students, who had a strange delusion wrapped up in the childhood character of the "sand-man." His nursemaid would tell him that the "sand-man" would come and throw sand in his eyes if he was not good, and this fear was later transferred to a general fear of his eyes being damaged that lasted until adulthood. Freud believes this very common fear of going blind is really just a fear of castration, as shown in Oedipus blinding himself in the play Oedipus Rex. Another related image of the uncanny is the image of the "double", or evil twin. The double becomes an imager of the ego projected into the world that threatens the identity of the other and hence is connected with death. Another example of the uncanny is the evil eye, which is a common representation of envy. Another example is the notion of the animistic universe related to a narcissistic worldview. This is the idea that the universe is somehow conscious and will respond negatively to the thoughts of the subject.

In Section III, Freud argues that the uncanny is really a familiar thing that has been repressed. This happens when either a childhood belief has been repressed and then is recalled, or when an ancient belief from tradition is somehow supported by experience, such as the belief in ghosts or demons. Ultimately, the uncanny is related to the feelings of dread and anxiety that we felt as children.

Some of these feelings are associated with repressed sexual desires. For instance, Freud believes that many neurotic men think that the female genitals are uncanny. This relates to the original psychosexual development when, as children, males believed that females, lacking a penis, had been castrated. The female genitals then, represent the fear and danger of castration to many males. It is this sense of familiarity mixed with strange difference that makes up the uncanny.



Characters

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud was an Austrian psychiatrist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who developed the practice of psychoanalysis. Freud was originally trained as a medical doctor. He began to examine his patients that were brought to him for hysteria and other minor medical disorders and began to develop a theory that their conditions were psychological in nature. He theorized that psychological disorders were caused by repression of certain basic drives or impulses by the higher order, moral mind. He developed the process of psychoanalysis to show the patient the particular part of their psyche that they are repressing in an attempt to reintegrate that part of the mind and eliminate the disorder. Many of the underlying psychological processes dealt with infantile and childhood sexuality and were shocking to many of the readers at the time.

Freud's ideas, though controversial, were extremely influential. He taught many later innovators in psychology, including Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Wilhelm Reich and others. He developed the international institutions of a psychoanalytic movement and generated lot of attention towards the importance of psychological, possibly hidden motives. A Jew, he was forced to flee Austria after the Nazi's annexed the country in the 1930s. Although many psychologists and psychiatrists have moved away from his theories recently, his influence is still felt in the way that we think about the mind. It is hard to imagine how our views of sexuality, motivation and religion would have developed without the influence of Freud in the twentieth century.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is the technique of investigating and curing psychological disorders that Freud developed and that he counted as his most important contributions to medical science. Psychoanalytic theory holds that there are parts of the mind, the unconscious, that are not directly open to investigation by the conscious mind. Nevertheless, these parts of the mind can explain much of our behavior, and it is important to understand what is going on in the unconscious mind if we want to explain our beliefs and behavior. The mind is made up of three basic structures, the Id, the Ego, and the Super-ego. Each part of the mind is the product of a developmental process and is related to specific drives. Often the drives from Id, often present from childhood will be suppressed, as one gets older by the ego and super-ego. Sometimes this suppression can lead to the desire reasserting itself in strange ways that is in anxiety that seems to lack a definite source or in strange dreams. One of the main goals of psychoanalysis is to root out these repressed desires and identify them so that the pathologies that they cause can be eliminated.

The method of psychoanalytic treatment varies, but it mostly involves trying to find the source of the conflict by letting the mind freely associate ideas and words or by



investigating dreams. The patient will often lie on a couch while he or she tells the psychiatrist about their dreams. Although Freud considered psychoanalysis to be a science, it has been widely discredited, though many of its techniques and concepts are still used in mainstream psychology.

Unconscious

The unconscious is the part of our mind that is underneath the surface of conscious thought and is not accessible, except in dreams and memories to the conscious mind.

Id

The Id is the most primal part of the psyche that is present from the earliest ages. It only cares about pleasure and does not consider social mores or rules as appropriate restraints.

Ego

In opposition to the "pleasure principle" of the Id, the ego operates on the "reality principle" and develops as the Id must confront the limitations of the outside world.

Super-Ego

The super-ego develops as the ego becomes more and more reflective and sensitive to outside rules, especially of morality.

Eros

Eros is the Greek word for striving love. Freud uses it as a term for any strong desire that is focused on a particular person or object.

Libido

The libido is related to Eros in that it is the life force that drives the Id forward in search of pleasure. It is contrasted with Thanatos, the death wish that longs for annihilation.

Leonardo Da Vinci

Leonardo Da Vinci was a Florentine painter, scientist, and inventor who are remembered as the greatest of all "renaissance men." He is considered one of the best painters of the period and is also responsible for many important scientific discoveries and innovative inventions.

Oedipus

Oedipus is the main character in the Sophocles tragedy, Oedipus Rex. Through a variety of circumstances in the play, Oedipus ends up unwittingly killing his father and sleeping with his mother. After learning that he has committed these crimes, he blinds himself by stabbing his eyes. Freud believed that many men had an Oedipus complex that makes them want to sleep with their mother and kill their father.



Objects/Places

Screen Memories

A screen memory is a memory that seems to be a banal memory from childhood but is really symbolically related to another, more distressing, memory or episode.

Obsessional Neurosis

A category of unwanted anxiety disorders (neurosis) whereby the patients mind is oppressed by repeated images or impulses which are unwanted and hard to control.

Hysteria

Hysteria is a neurotic condition that leads the patient to lose control over their emotions either in elation or fear for unknown causes. Some of Freud's earliest patients were female hysterics.

Neurosis

Neurosis, according to Freud, was a psychological disorder that resulted from the repressed conflict between the id and other parts of the psyche, most commonly the super-ego. Neurosis can take many forms, including phobia, obsessions, and hysteria among others.

Phobia

Phobia is a particular kind of neurosis that involves the irrational and obsessive fear of something.

Milan

Milan is an Italian city, the capital of Lombardi today known as a center of world fashion and once famous for art and a center of political intrigue.

Alchemy

Alchemy was a pseudo-scientific enterprise whereby the alchemist attempted to convert base metals like iron into precious metals like gold. Although totally spurious, many people who practiced alchemy eventually led to the creation of modern chemistry.



Syncretism

Syncretism is the practice, more common in ancient times, of creating systems of thought that allow seemingly conflicting religious beliefs to coexist.

Automata

An automaton is a self-propelled and self-directed machine. Freud believed that automata were uncanny because they looked like humans.

Doppelganger

A Doppelganger is a double or twin of a person that is a symbol and sign of evil. Sometimes known as an "Evil twin" or "double."



Themes

The Power of the Unconscious

The main theme in almost all of Freud's work and certainly here is the power of the unconscious mind. The unconscious is the part of the mind that operates behind the scenes; that is, unbeknown to the conscious mind. Our conscious minds involve the thoughts and memories that are available to us under normal circumstances. This is the part of the mind that we are using most of the day. Freud's insight was to suggest that in addition to this part of the mind, there is also another part of the mind that is not always apparent to us, but that has immense power over our lives. The image of this structure of the mind is often compared to an iceberg, where the conscious mind is merely the tip of the iceberg that is above water, whereas the most powerful and dangerous part of the iceberg lies below the water, out of sight. This part of our mind that remains out of sight is the unconscious. Freud argued that the unconscious mind would make itself known during dreams, where it was able to live out unfulfilled desires from the daytime. In dreams, the normal restraints on the unconscious mind are let loose and the mind feels free to roam in its desires. One of the key aspects of this part of the mind is the id, or the primal part of the mind that is only interested in seeking pleasure. This urge, if suppressed by the more conscious parts of the mind, can turn into powerful unconscious forces that cause psychological pathologies like Neurosis. Freud's goal in many of these essays is to show the power of the unconscious mind in this process.

The Developmental Mind

Related to the power of the unconscious mind is the idea of the mind as a thing that develops. The traditional psychological view, a view that many still hold, is that the mind is basically fully formed in childhood and only becomes more and more advanced as one ages. Freud argues, however, that the mind is made up of several structures that grow at different rates and in different stages. The id is the mind that we basically inherit from our earliest ancestors and even animals, and that only seeks pleasure. This part of our mind is oblivious to the constraints that the outside world places on our behavior. The ego is the partially conscious part of our mind that develops as the id is restrained by reality and the rules imposed from outside. The normal process of maturation is the process of ego formation and development. Later, the super-ego develops to monitor and reflect on the ego, this is the part of the mind that restrains the other parts with moral and religious rules. Freud puts so much emphasis on childhood development and childhood sexuality because it is in childhood that the ego and the super-ego are developing in relation to the id and if that development is hampered or impaired, psychological pathologies can develop. Today, most people understand that the proper development of adult psychology begins in childhood, but at the time, Freud's ideas were controversial and radical. Many of these essays are elaborations on themes of childhood mental and psychological development.



The Hidden Mind

The idea of the hidden mind is not only the idea of the unconscious mind, but also the idea that there are forces in the human mind that are not immediately accessible. The whole idea of modern psychology and especially psychoanalysis comes from this notion. The role of the psychologist is to help the patient learn things about their own mind that is hidden. This idea seems initially, however, quite bizarre. How could a stranger be able to see further into one's own mind than they can see themselves? Freud however argues that there are secret forces that work in regular and predictable ways inside everyone's mind. In these essays, Freud shows us how some of these forces can work.

One aspect of the hidden mind is the sexual desires of the mind that may be either inappropriate or troubling. The idea of family romance is an example of sexual desires that Freud claims are inappropriate and hence suppressed. Other hidden or suppressed desire may include the desire to harm one's father for fear that he will harm the son in some way, or the male fear of castration. Freud argues that anxiety and many phobias are the result of these hidden desires or fears that have been suppressed by the conscious mind. Once we understand that the part of the mind is hidden, we begin to look for psychological operations in places that we would not have otherwise. The most obvious example of this is the Freudian penchant for using dreams to uncover repressed desires. These desires are hidden to the conscious mind but exposed in the dream state or, as we see in these essays, screen memories.

Style

Perspective

Freud writes all of these essays from the perspective of the inquisitive and detached doctor. Freud, of course, was a doctor, and many of the subjects of these essays are actually drawn from Freud's clinical experience. In all of his work, Freud can sometimes be off-putting by his clear interest and dedication to the subject material combined with his extremely detached stance. He will discuss incest, childhood sexual fantasies, and desires of murder with the clinical detachment that is befitting the cool psychologist, but seems alien to the sentiments that naturally surround these taboo topics. Without this particular perspective, there is no doubt that Freud would be completely unable to approach these topics at all given their nature. To be sure, his work was and is controversial, though less so now that his ideas have filtered into the general culture. If, however, Freud with any hint of inappropriate interest or sounded a moralizing note, it would be much harder to take the insights that he is offering. Freud writes like the removed doctor, sitting on the chair next to the patient, explaining and listening to their symptoms, sympathetically, but ultimately to understand and cure them, not to empathize. This scientific approach to the human mind, so revolutionary at the time, still strikes the modern reader in interesting ways. After all, Freud is able to talk about the strange childhood fantasies of Leonardo Da Vinci without making his analysis seem ridiculous. This is a truly important feat that is only accomplished because of the detached perspective that Freud takes.

Tone

The tone of these essays, like the detached perspective, is also cool and clinical. Freud, though discussing the sexual fantasies of a young Leonardo Da Vinci and describing them in an extremely strange way, maintains what seems to be a scholarly tone throughout. This lends credibility to his, admittedly, strange interpretations of dreams and memories. In one example, Freud is discussing the fantasy that one of his patients has of, presumably, raping a younger girl, without a hint of condemnation. It is as if he is saying to the reader and the patient that there are strange and dark things in everyone's mind. The point for Freud is to free the mind of the patient and the reader so that these dark fantasies no longer rule the internal life of the unconscious. To rid ourselves of these impulses and neurosis, it is important for Freud to be able to show us the strange workings of the unconscious without frightening us. He explains the psychological pathologies of his patients in the same way that a medical doctor might show and explain a clump of cancer cells. There is no point hating the cancer or being upset by it—from the doctor's point of view, the only important thing is to remove the cancer. This mentality comes out in Freud's approach to psychological pathologies. The tone is scientific and removed; he points out clearly but without much fanfare, the pathologies that lurk underneath the surface of our minds, hopefully, to cure us of the diseases.



Structure

This book is organized into a series of essays. Several like "Family Romances" are very short, while others are much longer. The essay on Leonardo Da Vinci is the longest and is made up of six sections. The essay on Leonardo is a prolonged investigation into one particular memory from Leonardo Da Vinci's youth that Leonardo wrote about in one of his notebooks. The memory is a short, strange episode involving a vulture, and Freud spends the essay investigating each important aspect of the memory until we see the memory as a symbolic representation of a very complicated sexual and mythological desire for the mother's affection, which was later translated into a kind of idealized homosexuality. The other long essay in the book is the title essay on the uncanny. This essay is also divided into several sections, though it is not as long as the essay on Leonardo da Vinci. This essay is also less structured in many ways than the Leonardo essay. In the first section of the essay, Freud delves into a detailed and prolonged investigation into the etymology of the German word for uncanny. While this investigation is fruitful, the length of it seems out of proportion to its importance. The early essays set the stage for the later ones in many ways. We are introduced to the notion of screen memories and family romances early, which later make an appearance in the longer essay on Leonardo. The uncanny also uses the themes developed earlier on, but in a more abstract way.



Quotes

"One of them takes the importance of the experience as a motive for wanting it remembered, but the other - the force of resistance - opposes this preferential choice."
Screen Memories, p. 7

"Such a memory, whose value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic or similar nature, is what I would call a screen memory."
Screen Memories, p. 15

"It is perhaps altogether questionable whether we have any conscious memories from childhood: perhaps we have only memories of childhood."
Screen Memories, p. 21

"Instead of playing, he now fantasizes, building castles in the air and fashioning what are called daydreams."
The Creative Writer and Daydreams, p. 27

"Indeed the progress of society in general rests upon the opposition between the generations."
Family Romances, p. 37

"The child's overestimation of his parents is thus retained in the dreams of the normal adult."
Family Romances, p. 40

"He [Leonardo] often seemed indifferent to good and evil, or demanded that he should be measured by a special yardstick."
Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood, p. 50

"Anything sexual is so resolutely shunned that it seems as though Eros alone, the preserver of all that lives, is unworthy to be the object of the scientist's thirst for knowledge."
Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood, p. 51

"It is doubtful whether Leonardo ever held a woman in a passionate embrace."
Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood, p. 51

"The translation then points to an erotic meaning."
Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood, p. 62

"Finally, as civilization progressed, so much of the divine and the sacred had been drained from sexuality that the exhausted remains were subject to contempt."
Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood, p. 71



"It often happens, that neurotic men state that to them there is something uncanny about the female genitals."
The Uncanny, p. 151



Topics for Discussion

Explain the phenomenon of screen memories. How are they different from actual memories? What is their cause?

In what way is a daydream different from a normal, night dream? In what ways is it similar?

Are the desires of a male child to sexually possess his mother depraved? According to Freud, what is their cause?

Explain Freud's analysis of the vulture symbol in da Vinci's memory. Do you think he is right?

Why does Freud think that Leonardo was a homosexual? Is his conclusion warranted?

What does uncanny mean to Freud?

Give some examples of the uncanny that Freud uses.