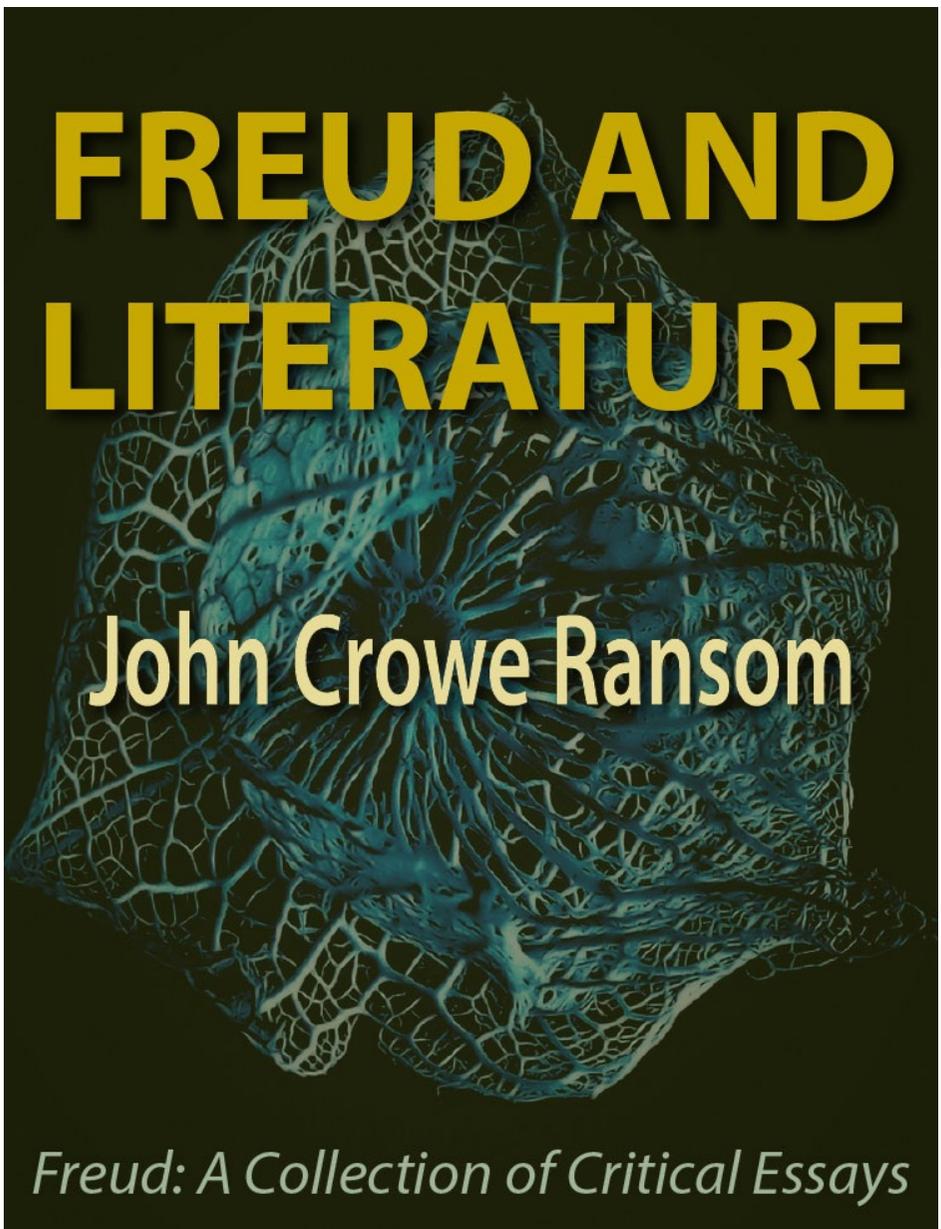


FREUD AND LITERATURE

John Crowe Ransom

Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays



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Notes on the Author and Editor

John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974), American poet, critic, and educator.

Perry Meisel, editor of this volume, teaches English at New York University, and is the author of *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* and *Thomas Hardy: The Return of the Repressed*.

Freud and Literature [\[1\]](#)

By John Crowe Ransom

As for psycho-analysis, it is quite becoming that the doctors should still disagree about it; but the poets —and under that title must be included all the “makers” who in their laboratories fashion and dissect the souls of men — find much less difficulty in accepting it as gospel truth.

The legends, the mythologies, the demonologies, and the fairy tales of all the races bear witness to the truth of Doctor Freud’s startling yet not quite novel theses. To be the complete psycho-analyst implies not only that you are possessed of the historic sense, but that you are also possessed of the prehistoric or biological sense, which believes beyond other senses in the continuity of the life-forms.

For what are our aberrant behaviours but the ways of ghosts that haunt within us, grotesque, antiquated, and forlorn, but still exuberating a little out of their eternal energies?

A man, in the Freudian concept, is not on the one hand one of those bifurcated radishes, with a locomotor arrangement, and a dome at the top which seethes with chemical reactions of considerable intricacy; nor on the other hand is he an adult angel constructed out of light, who knows what he

does and does what he intends to do. The Freudian man is multiple rather than simple, many men bound up loosely in one man. He is in fact a pack of demons, going under the name of John Doe for his legal functions, all of them held under the rod in subjection to a mannerly sort of arch-demon, who persuades himself and the world that he is the real John Doe, the one and only.

The other demons are quiet now, as we contemplate Doe in his beautiful integrity, but they will emerge under pressure. And then John Doe will make motions scandalous and mystifying to his society—clearly diabolical, yet if understood possibly wistful or even splendid.

Marvellous is the presumption of that dogmatic modernist Doe — ignorant that he is a cave within whom the fabulous civil war may at any moment go to raging—who thinks that he will take unto himself a little wife, and buy a little home on terms, and devote his eight laborious hours to business, and accomplish a stout and dreamless happiness. Marvellous, though sometimes his egotism seems to be justified by the event; for nothing happens, and he dies, the same little man of the clock at seventy that he was at twenty, and is buried; and perchance if rumor be true he will be raised up in all his simplicity to live again. But that is the most uninteresting case; or rather, that is the outside of his case, but the inside we can only hypothesize.

Naive literature is full of psycho-analysis; its demoniac possessions are half symbolic, and half literal truth; for there is no length to which the poetic imagination will not go. Now it was hardly through literature that Doctor Freud approached his discoveries; nor is it profitable to ask whether the fantastic seizures which he saw overtaking his contemporaries, co-heirs of an age of reason, and which he labored so nobly to alleviate, evoked from him the wry smile to which the irony of the situation entitled him from the literary point of view. But at any rate literature is bound to make an enormous accession of evidence for Freudianism when it is studied for that purpose. And for that matter, the Freudian psychology, if it keeps that name, will be far more than one man's work before it is completed. It will be like a mediaeval Gothic cathedral, for whole generations of scholars will have helped to put it together; and we could delimit offhand a dozen or so separate fields of labor, such as ethnology, biology, comparative religions, primitivisms, language, the "lost knowledge" of symbols, the biography of genius, and poetry. And when the grand edifice is completed, the result will be a complexity and yet a unification of doctrine, perhaps as imposing a structure as the world has seen.

In what sense a unification? In Freudian doctrine the psyche, for all its demons, has much fewer parts than in the old psychology. The old school, whenever it put its finger on a new behaviour, hypostatized a new instinct, a new "faculty." When it encountered one that was unusually irregular, it always wanted to throw up its hands and say, "Madness." But the way of our

intellect demands a reduction of these parts, right down to the irreducible. On the Continent a group of thinkers, less tolerant of the heterogenies than the thinkers in our longitude, had already made a great deal of play with sex as a centralizing concept, explaining as forms of that impulse the romances, the idealisms, the labors of genius, and the art-works of man; and this principle they held to without resorting to much actual demonstration. It was Freud's role to reduce to the sex-principle in more scientific fashion; but he is perfectly willing for you to substitute for sex another term, like love, or affectional tendencies, or centrifugal tendencies, if his term is too limited for you by connotations that are specific. Around this center he makes a multitude of otherwise scattering manifestations of behaviour gravitate. It is a simplification of revolutionary proportions; though it will still be true that this basic force of Freud's attaches itself to a variety of objects and gives rise to very mixed personalities, which permit themselves to be conceived (at least by literary people) as demons inhabiting the psyche; some of them atavistic, and continuing an existence of a previous incarnation, and some of them dating back merely into infant or early adult life.

But sex, though much, is not all; and what Freud would now attempt, as he says in a late work, is no less than a meta-psychology, which would write on its broadest lines the fundamental economy of the psyche, with a minimum of improvised and penultimate or antepenultimate terms.

And if this simplification is fully accomplished, and accepted, the world will wonder how it put up so long with the psychological monstrosity, the fantasticum, that our books said must pass for a man. Nothing in the whole realm of knowledge is changing so fast nor so radically as psychology, and the rate of the change is the rate at which we throw off an inherited accumulation of terms (but not a synthesis) which made a man, the total, a crazy apparatus. Copernicus overthrew the Ptolemaic astronomy by virtue of inventing a principle that accounted economically for the celestial motions without recourse to such vagaries as the eccentrics and epicycles with which the Ptolemaists had to patch their system together. Just such a revolution, it seems to a member of the laity, is in process with respect to the theory of man and his behaviour; and Doctor Freud himself has admitted with charming candor that his psychology offers the best economy in sight.

Already a new literature has sprung up to welcome the new learning. Sherwood Anderson here, and Lawrence and Miss West and Miss Sinclair and the author [David Garnett] of the brilliant (but too facile) *Lady into Fox* in England, to call a few names. Their exhibit is of something deeper and richer than we find in their old-style contemporaries, precisely as one of Doctor Freud's technical studies seems to be less desiccated and to hold a better converse with fundamental realities than the formulas of the eclectics. And yet in this literature generally, it must be admitted, there is an accent which is repulsive to the reading public; it deals too frankly with aberrations of sex, in

the specific sense of the term.

In this sense sex is still taboo in literature; it is obscene just as in the Greek tragedy certain parts of the fable were obscene and must take place off the stage. The literary adaptators of psycho-analysis have very boldly and with a rather crude art translated the most sensational features of the science bodily into literature, where they are calculated to become accessible to the general public. This procedure need not be considered fatal to the new art. It is probable that the artists can, as they have usually been required to do, find artistic ways of handling a dangerous material, and that they can also try material no less rich in ultimate interest which is not so immediately spectacular. At any rate it is evident that the world is far from ready to allow these artists, on the plea of their new learning, to alter suddenly the whole technique of literature.

For if we are not mistaken, the fundamental character of literature is to become a public property as soon as it is uttered; and any instance is by so much the less a piece of literature as it has lost sight of this function. It must offer a value readily both to the many and to the few. It may be that we should be too exacting of literature if we required that it should never intimidate the people by its difficulty, but certainly we are in our rights in requiring that it must never affront them with an attack upon their morality. And so the fable, the obvious meaning of literature, lies on the surface to be easily

appropriated by the people; but the initiated, according to their several degrees of advancement in the mysteries, can find further meanings suitable to their need, and these become more and more esoteric. Literature emulates the Apostle in attempting to be all things to all men, nor are men ever too humble to be the proper objects of its interest. And since the humblest must have their access as well as the greatest, literature becomes a study in indirection: its highest meaning, which is generally unsuitable for popular use, is discoverable but not manifest, and nowhere by its unconventionality does it flout what the orator terms “the moral sensibilities of decent men.”

Our literary giants hitherto, who have obeyed so well this last maxim, have not on the other hand been so conspicuously lacking in the depth of their psychology— that is, in their power to psycho-analyse —as the new school might wish to believe. This phenomenon is easily possible by reason of the fact that psycho-analysis is not at all points a new technique, but rather the systematic or scientific application of a technique that poets and artists have generally been aware of. Any good novelist, for example, tends to derive the behaviour of his characters from the deepest sources that he knows, and shows a considerable power in factoring the multiples which are his characters. Henry James was interested in the study of race—and place — types in their most perfect bloom, or where they were furthest from their roots, and hardest to derive; but he goes conscientiously backwards into origins all the same; and differs eternally from the best-seller writer in this,

that he had a perfect sense of the toughness of the strains that compose an individual life, and never works the fiat of the omnipotent author who by a stroke of his pen will make his characters conform to the fable which he has, with an eye to the fruits of his hire, after all predetermined. It was Conrad's habit also to deal in fundamental cores of character which never evaporated even in the unlikeliest milieu. And Galsworthy is extremely sensitive to the conditions of continuance and decay of inherited type-tendencies.

We do not impeach the truthfulness or the profundity of these writers when we say that with access to psycho-analysis proper they might have found truth and depth even readier to their hands and teeming with vaster multitudes of significant life-forms. This we say because we have been convinced in our own experience of how much light psycho-analysis can throw upon the baffling relations of life —and of how much more epic and fascinating it shows the daily business of being human to be.

And another kind of evidence will show us to what a poor pass an inadequate psychology, even in the hands of able writers, can bring a literature. The Main Street school of fiction constitutes this exhibit. Very banal, mean-spirited, and provincial is this pure Americanism which distinguishes the present literary period in America. Writers in this field, for all the smartness of their realism, and of course with more than a tithe of exceptional passages in which they are nobler than their program, are as

schoolmasters and schoolma'ams going forth to make a "survey" of some selected section of the American community; preferably a section of rustics; or village-dwellers. The aim of this survey is to ascertain the state of "culture" extant among the specimens; the method is to compile the details of spoken idiom, of interior decoration, of religious ceremonies, of public amusements, of etiquette, of the ritual of sewing societies and luncheon clubs—in all of which the surveyed fall far short of a certain standard. Of course the total effect is devastating. Now it is too true that we have never had in this country a noble literature of the soil, as England has had it; but would not even we miss something from our reading if we can imagine what would happen to the literature of the soil in England (or in Scandinavia or in Russia) if it were systematically rewritten from the Main Street school's point of view? The two performances would differ *toto caelo*. As the case stands, it is unlikely that there has been mourning in Heaven over one sinner of Mr. Hardy's for smacking his lips over his Wessex mead or taking peasant's license with Queen Victoria's English. The dignity of a man does not depend upon his equipment in the negotiable goods of culture, nor could a profound psychologist be deluded into thinking that in such equipment lie the solid satisfactions of a man's life; that is the thinking of pedants and spinsters who do not themselves know life, and, failing that, are not even versed in a thorough-going psychology, like psycho-analysis. But when *Winesburg, Ohio* appeared, it almost seemed as if for the first time in our history American

humble folk were depicted in the possession of their inalienable human rights, by virtue of exercising frankly those radical and immitigable passions which are the most that human beings can possess; they were not again being set down in that ignominy to which our literary pedants had usually consigned them.

Demonology is always poetic, and so have been the implications of Doctor Freud's studies in psycho-analysis. But nothing of his has ever so teased the poetic imagination as the vast and brilliant speculations in his last two small volumes.

Incidentally, he has hazarded these speculations with more than his habitual caution, and the modesty with which he propounds his opinions ought to be an example to the embittered anti-Freudians.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, his thesis is briefly as follows. The instincts generally —though he is unable to say always—seem to have the character of repetition-compulsions. They repeat the reactions that served life in a previous incarnation when it was organically more simple. But one by one these repetitions have to be discarded as inadequate to the new complications of existence; actually, as is very well known, the embryo vainly goes through the successive forms of lower life, and is permitted to stop on none of them. The persistence of these useless repetitions indicates then the

resentment which the individual feels towards the pain of his eternal process of adaptations. And therefore it may be said that the instincts express the individual's natural preference for quietude and death rather than life. His evolution into an intricate organism, which in the collective mass with others makes what we call civilization, is an achievement not of his own wish, but due to the stimuli impinging incessantly and inescapably upon him. "In the last resort it must have been the evolution of our earth, and its relation to the sun, that has left its imprint on the development of organisms."

The philosophy shadowed by this remarkable hypothesis has obvious affiliations with Schopenhauer, though the latter's equipment was evidently in intuition rather than science. Schopenhauer's pessimistic consequence is very properly taboo in the moral or practical world, but should at any rate receive from the English-speaking races its due as philosophy.

Without committing themselves at the present time, literary scholars might at least do this service for Freud's latest thesis, since it would in any case constitute a disinterested service to truth in general: they might marshal some of the enormous mass of testimony to be found in English poetry, under its camouflage, for the Will to Die. It is quite likely that the English poets have celebrated one thing more than immortality, and that is mortality. With a veil over their obscenity they gloat on death, to whom even beauty and love are prey. Human life may be surveyed at this stage in that spirit which may turn

out to be the last and most rational of all the modes of mind —the spirit of tragic irony. To be a tragic ironist is to be aware sharply and grimly, but not too painfully, of the constant involvement of life with death. In that spirit Homer sang, and the makers of the ballads, and Shakespeare the maker of sonnets and plays —

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death.

Notes

- [1] "Freud and Literature," by John Crowe Ransom. Copyright © 1924 by *The Saturday Review of Literature*. The essay originally appeared as a review of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in *The Saturday Review of Literature* on October 4, 1924. Reprinted by permission of The Saturday Review and the Estate of John Crowe Ransom.

Chronology of Important Dates

- 1856 Freud born in Freiberg, Moravia (now Pribor, Czechoslovakia), on May 6.
- 1860 Freud family moves to Vienna.
- 1865 Enters Gymnasium.
- 1873 Enters University of Vienna as medical student.
- 1876- Works as assistant in Brucke's Institute of Physiology; meets Josef Breuer.
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- 1877 First medical research articles published.
- 1880 Translates four essays by John Stuart Mill for a German edition of Mill's works.
- 1881 Takes medical degree.
- 1882 Engagement to Martha Bernays; begins work at Vienna General Hospital.
- 1885 Appointed *Privatdozent* (lecturer) in neuropathology at University of Vienna.
- 1885- Attends Charcot's lectures at the Salpetriere in Paris, October to February.
86

- 1886 Marries Martha Bernays; begins private medical practice as specialist in nervous diseases.
- 1887 Meets Berlin physician and medical theorist Wilhelm Fliess; begins use of hypnotism in private practice.
- 1889 Visits Bernheim in Nancy for further researches into hypnosis.
- 1893 "Preliminary Communication" (with Breuer).
- 1894 "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defense."
- 1895 *Studies on Hysteria* (with Breuer, although cases and discussions written and signed separately); writes *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and mails it to Fliess (first published in 1950).
- 1896 Death of Freud's father, Jakob Freud; first use of term "psychoanalysis."
- 1897 Abandons seduction theory; begins self-analysis.
- 1899 "Screen Memories."
- 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams* (published in December 1899, but postdated for the new century).
- 1901 *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

- 1902 Appointed Professor Extraordinarius (associate professor) at University of Vienna; Wednesday evening meetings begin at Freud's house of the group that will become the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society; end of friendship with Fliess.
- 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality; Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious; Case of Dora* ("Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Flysteria").
- 1906 Jung makes contact with Freud.
- 1907 *Jensen's 'Gradiva.'*
- 1908 First international meeting of psychoanalysts at Salzburg; "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"; "Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness."
- 1909 Visits America with Jung and Sandor Ferenczi; receives honorary degree from Clark University and delivers *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*; A. A. Brill's first English translations begin to appear; Case of Little Hans ("Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy"); Case of the Rat Man ("Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis").
- 1910 *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood; "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words.'*"
- 1911 The Case of Schreber ("Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia").
- 1911-15 Papers on psychoanalytic technique.
- 1913 *Totem and Taboo*; association with Jung terminated; Jung secedes from International Psychoanalytic Association the following year.

- 1914 *The Moses of Michelangelo; On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement; "On Narcissism."*
- 1915 Writes twelve papers on metapsychology, of which only five survive ("Instincts and their Vicissitudes," "Repression," "The Unconscious," "A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams," "Mourning and Melancholia").
- 1915-17 Gives *Introductory Lectures* at University of Vienna.
- 1918 Case of the Wolf Man ("From the History of an Infantile Neurosis").
- 1919 "The 'Uncanny.'"
- 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.*
- 1921 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.*
- 1923 *The Ego and the Id*; first of thirty-three operations for cancer of the jaw and palate.
- 1925 "A Note on the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'"; "Negation"; *An Autobiographical Study.*
- 1926 *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety; The Question of Lay Analysis.*
- 1927 *The Future of an Illusion.*

- 1928 "Dostoyevsky and Parricide."
- 1930 Goethe Prize; *Civilization and its Discontents*; death of Freud's mother.
- 1933 Hitler comes to power; burning of Freud's books in Berlin; *New Introductory Lectures*.
- 1936 Eightieth birthday; formal celebrations; elected Corresponding Member of the Royal Society.
- 1937 "Analysis Terminable and Interminable."
- 1938 Nazis enter Austria; Freud leaves for England; *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (published posthumously)
- 1939 *Moses and Monotheism*; dies on September 23 in Hampstead, London.

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Life and Career

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biographical accounts include the testament of Freud's physician, Max Schur, *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York: International Universities Press, 1972), and revisionist studies such as Paul Roazen's *Freud and His Followers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), and Frank Sulloway's *Freud: Biologist of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). Much historical information is also available in Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1970). Richard Wollheim's *Sigmund Freud* (New York: Viking, 1971) provides an excellent concise account of the development of Freud's ideas; Philip Rieff's *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959; 3rd ed., 1979) remains a provocative and comprehensive introduction to the range and play of Freud's thought. For the best guide to Freudian terms, see Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973).

Selected Studies

Given the enormous scope of the literature on and about Freud, the following selected list of books and articles is limited to those studies that focus on the literary Freud. Of the increasingly large amount of material on the literary Freud available in French, selections have been made only from among those works translated into English.

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