

Sigmund Freud and the Discovery of the New Self

1856 born
1880 graduated in medicine from the University of Vienna
1897 self-analysis
1900 published *The Interpretation of Dreams*
1923 published *The Ego and the Id*
1938 fled Austria to England
1939 died

The visible, day-to-day events of Sigmund Freud's life are almost totally unrelated to what is important about the man and his work. He lived for almost eighty years in Vienna, where he was trained as a physician, where he practiced, theorized, wrote, and taught. As the favorite child of a well-to-do Jewish merchant family, he was loved and indulged. As an adult, he was happily married, the father of six children, experiencing the joys and sorrows common to ordinary fathers of ordinary families. Yet this man, who was himself staid, conventional, shy, and even "Victorian" about matters of sex, almost single-handedly created the modern "sexual revolution." Though he expected obedience and respect from his own children, he fathered the modern fashion of rebellion against parental authority. His training as a medical scientist taught him to look for clinically verifiable truths, yet he opened up the chaotic, individualistic mirror-world of wish-fulfillment fantasy. And while himself the most gentle and kindly of people, he nevertheless taught others to bring out into the open and express their most terrible hatreds, their most primal aggressions, their most destructive fears. In short, Sigmund Freud caused a revolution in the way people think about themselves and others so profound that it may, in and of itself, set the twentieth century apart from every earlier age in human history.

Freud graduated from the University of Vienna medical school in 1880 and the following year was licensed as a physician. His specialty was



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neurology, and he had already developed an interest in neuropathology. In addition to his hospital practice with severely disturbed patients, he soon began to see private patients suffering from emotional disorders. Eager to discover new methods of treating his patients, he experimented with hypnosis, which he finally abandoned as a tool of therapy when he found a more reliable instrument in what came to be called "free association." He was beginning to sense the importance of sexual problems in mental and emotional disturbances, and he was discovering with increasing frequency that these problems could be traced back to childhood, even infancy.

In the late 1890s, Freud began a systematic, rigorous, exhausting self-analysis. He had nothing to guide him except his confusing experiences with disturbed patients, combined with a growing conviction that he might find within himself a model for the mental-emotional makeup of all human beings, and that by understanding himself he might be able to understand others and treat them. This was a remarkable insight. Freud did indeed find his model and, in the process, he delineated the methodology that is called psychoanalysis.

Dreams and the Inner Self

SIGMUND FREUD

The source of the model and method for Freud's self-analysis was frankly revealed in his later books, but at the time he was struggling through his self-analysis, it was barely hinted at in his papers and correspondence.

Then in 1950 there was discovered and shortly published an extensive corpus of letters from Freud to his friend and fellow physician in Berlin, Wilhelm Fliess. The letters, which dated from 1887 through 1902, reveal an intimate and completely candid account, often an almost day-to-day record, of Freud's self-analysis.

*In letters written in the latter part of 1897, Freud excitedly reported to Fliess the beginning of his work in interpreting his dreams, which he believed contained "the most valuable conclusions and evidence." Three years later, he published a book on the subject, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and he never ceased to hold that his work on dreams was "the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make." But regardless of how important one may consider Freud's dream theories to be—and they have aroused considerable controversy—it is nevertheless astonishing to note that, in the accounts and interpretations of his dreams that he wrote to Fliess in 1897, Freud has already begun to talk about such eminently Freudian notions as father-figure conflict, the mother as an object of sexual desire, infantile sexuality, sibling rivalry, transference, and the famous Oedipus complex. Even his much later ideas about psycho-analysis are anticipated.*

*We turn now to Freud's own account, in *The Origins of Psycho-analysis*, Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887–1902.*

14.8.97.

Aussee.

My dear Wilhelm,

After a spell of good spirits here I am now having a fit of gloom. The chief patient I am busy with is myself. My little hysteria, which was much intensified by work, has yielded one stage further. The rest still sticks. That is the first reason for my mood. This analysis is harder than any

¹ Quoted in the preface to the third English edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1911—F0

other. It is also the thing that paralyzes the power of writing down and communicating what so far I have learned. But I believe it has got to be done and is a necessary stage in my work. . . .

Outwardly very little is happening to me, but inside me something very interesting is happening. For the last four days my self-analysis, which I regard as indispensable for clearing up the whole problem, has been making progress in dreams and yielding the most valuable conclusions and evidence. At certain points I have the impression of having come to the end, and so far I have always known where the next night of dreams would continue. To describe it in writing is more difficult than anything else, and besides it is far too extensive. I can only say that in my case my father played no active role, though I certainly projected on to him an analogy from myself; that my "primary originator" [of neurosis] was an ugly, elderly but clever woman who told me a great deal about God and hell, and gave me a high opinion of my own capacities; that later (between the ages of two and two-and-a-half) libido towards *materem* was aroused; the occasion must have been the journey with her from Leipzig to Vienna, during which we spent a night together and I must have had the opportunity of seeing her *nudam* (you have long since drawn the conclusions from this for your own son, as a remark of yours revealed); and that I welcomed my one-year-younger brother (who died within a few months) with ill wishes and real infantile jealousy, and that his death left the germ of guilt in me. I have long known that my companion in crime between the ages of one and two was a nephew of mine who is a year older than I am and now lives in Manchester; he visited us in Vienna when I was fourteen. We seem occasionally to have treated my niece, who was a year younger, shockingly. My nephew and younger brother determined, not only the neurotic side of all my friendships, but also their depth. My anxiety over travel you have seen yourself in full bloom.

I still have not got to the scenes which lie at the bottom of all this. If they emerge, and I succeed in resolving my hysteria, I shall have to thank the memory of the old woman who provided me at such an early age with the means for living and surviving. . . .

. . . Last night's dream produced the following under the most remarkable disguises:

She was my instructress in sexual matters, and chided me for being clumsy and not being able to do anything (that is always the way with neurotic impotence: anxiety over incapacity at school gets its sexual reinforcement this way). I saw the skull of a small animal which I thought of as a "pig" in the dream, though it was associated in the dream with your wish of two years ago that I might find a skull on the Lido to enlighten me, as Goethe once did. But I did not find it. Thus it was "a little *Schafskopf*!"⁷² The whole dream was full of the most wounding ref-

⁷² Literally "sheep's head"; figuratively "blockhead."—Ed.

erences to my present uselessness as a therapist. Perhaps the origin of my tendency to believe in the incurability of hysteria should be sought here. Also she washed me in reddish water in which she had previously washed herself (not very difficult to interpret; I find nothing of the kind in my chain of memories, and so I take it for a genuine rediscovery); and she encouraged me to steal "Zehners" (ten-Kreuzer pieces) to give to her. A long chain of association connects these first silver Zehners to the heap of paper ten-florin notes which I saw in the dream as Martha's housekeeping money. The dream can be summed up as "bad treatment," just as the old woman got money from me for her bad treatment of me, so do I now get money for the bad treatment of my patients; a special role in it was played by Q, who conveyed through you a suggestion that I ought not to take money from her as the wife of a colleague (he stipulated that I should).

A severe critic might say that all this was phantasy projected into the past instead of being determined by the past. The *experimenta crucis* would decide the matter against him. The reddish water seems a point of this kind. Where do all patients derive the horrible perverse details which are often as alien to their experience as to their knowledge?

15.10.97.
IX. Bergasse 19.

My dear Wilhelm,

My self-analysis is the most important thing I have in hand, and promises to be of the greatest value to me, when it is finished. When I was in the very midst of it it suddenly broke down for three days, and I had the feeling of inner binding about which my patients complain so much, and I was inconsolable. . . .

My practice, ominously enough, still allows me plenty of free time.

All this is the more valuable from my point of view because I have succeeded in finding a number of real points of reference. I asked my mother whether she remembered my nurse. "Of course," she said, "an elderly woman, very shrewd indeed. She was always taking you to church. When you came home you used to preach, and tell us all about how God conducted His affairs. At the time I was in bed when Anna was being born" (Anna is two-and-a-half years younger) "she turned out to be a thief, and all the shiny Kreuzers and Zehners and toys that had been given you were found among her things. Your brother Philipp went himself to fetch the policeman, and she got ten months." Now see how that confirms the conclusions from my dream interpretation. I have easily been able to explain the one possible mistake. I wrote to you that she got me to steal Zehners and give them to her. The dream really means that she stole herself. For the dream-picture was a memory that I took money from a doctor's mother, *i.e.*, wrongfully. The real meaning is that the old woman stood for me, and that the doctor's mother was my mother. I was

so far from being aware that the old woman was a thief that my interpretation went astray. I also asked about the doctor we had in Freiberg, because I had a dream full of animosity about him. In analysing the dream-personage behind whom he was hidden I remembered a Professor von K., my history master, who did not seem to fit in, as I had no particular feelings about him and indeed got on with him quite well. My mother told me that the doctor of my infancy had only one eye, and among all my masters Professor K. was the only one with the same disability!

It might be objected that these coincidences are not conclusive, because I might have heard that the nurse was a thief in later childhood and to all appearances forgotten the fact until it emerged in the dream. I think myself that that must have been the case. But I have another unexceptionable and amusing piece of evidence. If the woman disappeared so suddenly, I said to myself, some impression of the event must have been left inside me. Where was it now? Then a scene occurred to me which for the last twenty-nine years has been turning up from time to time in my conscious memory without my understanding it. I was crying my heart out, because my mother was nowhere to be found. My brother Philipp (who is twenty years older than I) opened a cupboard for me, and when I found that mother was not there either I cried still more, until she came through the door, looking slim and beautiful. What can that mean? Why should my brother open the cupboard for me when he knew that my mother was not inside it and that opening it therefore could not quiet me? Now I suddenly understand. I must have begged him to open the cupboard. When I could not find my mother, I feared she must have vanished, like my nurse not long before. I must have heard that the old woman had been locked, or rather "boxed" up, because my brother Philipp, who is now sixty-three, was fond of such humorous expressions, and still is to the present day. The fact that I turned to him shows that I was well aware of his part in my nurse's disappearance.

Since then I have got much further, but have not yet reached my real resting-place. Communicating the incomplete is so laborious and would take me so far afield that I hope you will excuse me, and content yourself with hearing the parts which are established for certain. If the analysis goes on as I expect, I shall write it all out systematically and lay the results before you. So far I have found nothing completely new, but all the complications to which by now I am used. It is no easy matter. Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise. Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood, even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have been made hysterics. (Similarly with the "romanticization of origins" in the case of paranoiacs—heroes, founders of religion.) If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes,

becomes intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dramas were such failures. Our feelings rise against any arbitrary, individual fate such as shown in the *Ahnfrau*,² etc., but the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfilment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state.

The idea has passed through my head that the same thing may lie at the root of *Hamlet*. I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intentions, but supposing rather that he was impelled to write it by a real event because his own unconscious understood that of his hero. How can one explain the hysteric Hamlet's phrase, "So conscience doth make cowards of us all," and his hesitation to avenge his father by killing his uncle, when he himself so casually sends his courtiers to their death and despatches Laertes so quickly? How better than by the torment roused to him by the obscure memory that he himself had meditated the same deed against his father because of passion for his mother—"use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?" His conscience is his unconscious feeling of guilt. And are not his sexual coldness when talking to Ophelia, his rejection of the instinct to beget children, and finally his transference of the deed from his father to Ophelia, typically hysterical? And does he not finally succeed, in just the same remarkable way as my hysterics do, in bringing down his punishment on himself and suffering the same fate as his father, being poisoned by the same rival?

Theory as Therapy

ANTHONY STORR

Freud's self-analysis, elaborated in his books and papers, his lectures, and his training of pupils, became the paradigm for the method of modern Freudian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis do to their patients almost exactly and literally what Freud did to himself. Both the man and the method have been institutionalized into what Anthony Storr calls "a point

² The title of a play by Grillparzer.—Ed.

of view, a way of thinking, an attitude to life." *Dr. Storr is himself a psychotherapist and the author of several books, including one on C. G. Jung. Freud's great dissident disciple. In the article excerpted below, "Freud on the Couch" (1970), which originally appeared in Horizon, Dr. Storr describes how Freud's experience of self-analysis and his treatment of patients by the principles he derived became the model for psychoanalysts who came after him. "If ever a man was a living example of his own theories," Storr contends, "it was Freud."*

And if something of the autocratic pose, The paternal strictness be distrusted, still Clung to his utterance and features, It was a protective imitation

For one who lived among enemies so long; If often he was wrong and at times absurd, To us he is no more a person Now but a whole climate of opinion.

OF COURSE W. H. Auden is right. Freud, like Marx and Darwin, those other destroyers of nineteenth-century preconceptions with whom his name is so often linked, is no longer merely a person; he is a point of view, a way of thinking, an attitude to life, and above all, a continuing force to be reckoned with, one who can be neither dismissed nor ignored by anyone concerned with the human predicament. His ideas have become so ubiquitous that it is difficult to imagine how men thought before he formulated them.

Before World War I our grandfathers would have considered themselves as being governed chiefly by reason, although subject to deplorable spells of irrationality. Freud reversed the picture, claiming that reason's voice, though persistent, had but a very small influence upon human conduct. Freud also made us regard both virtue and conventional morality with suspicion. In 1900 the man who displayed altruism and self-sacrifice would have been regarded as simply "good," and if he was celibate, would have been congratulated upon his self-control and spirituality. It would not have occurred to the Victorians to suspect that unselfishness might be self-punishment; that kindness might conceal a patronizing superiority; that altruism could be a mask for self-centeredness, or celibacy an ignominious flight from woman.

Darwin shook man's self-esteem by demonstrating his humble origins and his kinship with other animals. Freud shattered it by showing that man's proudest spiritual achievements were rooted in primitive instinct. Not even children were allowed their "innocence," and the cozy, comfortable love of the Victorian family was shown to be based upon violent sensuality.

Freud tore down many façades, leaving us naked and ashamed, but more realistic. Since his revelations, Western man has become incapable of taking any form of human behavior at face value. It is impossible to think of any other individual who has so affected the way we look at our ordinary daily pursuits.

There follows a sketch of Freud, through his early physiological and neurological training and his experimentation with hypnosis under the influence of Josef Breuer and Jean Martin Charcot, which led him to the important discovery of free association in dealing with hysterics.

Freud's passion for investigation into origins soon led to his exploring the childhood of his patients. Breuer's case had convinced him that some neurotic symptoms were concerned with the suppression of painful memories and that the recovery of these memories was accompanied by the disappearance of the symptoms. Pursuing this idea, Freud soon discovered that many of the distasteful incidents that his patients recalled and that seemed to have caused their illnesses were sexual in nature. Both Breuer and Charcot had, in Freud's hearing, dropped hints that the secrets of the marriage bed were connected with neurotic symptoms. But Freud, who was easily shocked and puritanical in temperament, did not take these remarks seriously and dismissed them from his mind. When he came to investigate his own patients, however, he discovered that a great many of their anxieties and painful memories centered around the facts of sexuality. Moreover, he established that the primary cause of neurosis was the sexuality of childhood.

Today this is taken so much for granted that it is difficult to realize the shock and surprise with which Freud's first announcements about infantile sexuality were received. Indeed, it was somewhat naive of him not to anticipate that people would be shocked, especially in view of his own prurience. But Freud the conventional, bourgeois family man and Freud the relentless seeker after truth were two very different people. If neurosis in adult life was, as seemed probable, the result of trauma in early childhood, and if these traumata were chiefly sexual in nature, then it was Freud's duty as a doctor and a scientist to say so, however unpalatable these truths might be. Freud, like many another Jew, had little expectation of being generally popular in any case, and abuse made him all the more obstinate. Instead of modifying his tone, he interpreted the inevitable attacks as further evidence to support the psychoanalytic view that men are intensely reluctant to face the truth about themselves. For by this time Freud's early belief that neurosis was due to traumatic incidents was gradually becoming modified. Although traumata could and did occur,

Freud's reluctance to become too personally involved with his patients. I do not think that transference would have been so clearly delineated if Freud had been of a warmer, less controlled temperament. Because he developed a technique in which he said very little, sat behind the patient, and did not obtrude his own personality, he was more of a blank screen than an active doctor would have been. He therefore tended to be more receptive to his patient's projections than a conventional doctor would have been. It is the unknown person upon whom we project our phantasies, and Freud discovered that being an enigma to his patients produced material of psychological interest from them.

The opening of the inner phantasy world of patients led to the exploration and investigation of all kinds of psychological data that had previously been dismissed as meaningless. The delusions of the insane, the irrational fears with which many people are burdened, and the whole realm of dreams were opened to analytical investigation.

Freud himself regarded dreams as the royal road to the unconscious. His book *The Interpretation of Dreams* was first published in 1900. To the end of his life he continued to regard it as his most important contribution to the understanding of the human mind. Ernest Jones reports that Freud's two favorite books were *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Of these books he said to Jones: "It seems to be my fate to discover only the obvious: that children have sexual feelings, which every nursemaid knows; and that night dreams are just as much a wish fulfillment as daydreams." *The Interpretation of Dreams* is largely concerned with Freud's own dreams. In October, 1897, during an extended period of self-analysis, he wrote a letter to Wilhelm Fliess in which he describes the basic elements of the Oedipus complex: love for the parent of the opposite sex and jealousy of the parent of the same sex. In his preface to the second edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud writes: "For me, of course, this book has an additional subjective significance, which I did not understand until after its completion. It revealed itself to me as a piece of self-analysis, as my reaction to the death of my father, that is, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, in a man's life."

This is by no means so for every man, and Freud's assumption underlines the point made above: that psychoanalysis in its original form was a father-oriented psychology. Freud, like many other people who become concerned with the treatment of neurotics, had his own share of neurotic symptoms. He suffered from anxiety attacks in which he had a fear of dying, and he was also overanxious about traveling. In addition, he suffered alternations of mood, being sometimes profoundly distressed, depressed, and unable to work, and more rarely, full of excitement and self-confidence. During the time of his engagement he was tortured by doubt about whether his fiancée really loved him. For a long time he could not tolerate any differences between her opinions and his own, and he demanded that she

what neurotics repressed was not simply the memory of such incidents but whole aspects of the primitive and instinctive parts of themselves.

Among Freud's early cases of hysteria were a surprisingly large number of patients who reported incidents of seduction by one or the other parent. At first Freud took these stories literally, but later he came to realize that what a patient told him was largely phantasy and wish-fulfillment, not an account of a real incident. This discovery was at first distressing to Freud, because he thought it represented a failure in his technique. However, he persisted with his investigations, and what finally emerged from this was the importance of the patient's inner world of phantasy. Instead of concentrating on actual childhood traumata, important as they may be, it became more and more a part of psychoanalytic technique to investigate the patient's inner world: that world of hopes, daydreams, fears, loves, and hates that originates in infancy, persists into adult life, and is only tenuously related to the hard facts of the real world.

Freud soon discovered that as the lengthy analysis proceeded, he himself became increasingly important in the patient's inner world. He wrote: "In every analytic treatment there arises, without the physician's agency, an intense emotional relationship between the patient and the analyst, which is not to be accounted for by the actual situation. It can be of a positive or of a negative character and can vary between the extremes of a passionate, completely sensual love and the unbridled expression of an embittered defiance and hatred." Around 1892 Freud began to be aware of the importance of this. The delinquency of transference is the second important innovation for which every psychotherapist, Freudian or not, must acknowledge a debt to Freud. When Jung first visited Freud in 1907, Freud asked him, "What do you think of transference?" Jung replied: "It is the alpha and omega in treatment." "You have understood," said Freud.

Transference is, of course, a universal phenomenon. When we enter a new situation in life or are confronted by a new person, we project upon him the prejudices of the past and our previous experience of people. Indeed, getting to know a person is largely a matter of withdrawing projections, of dispelling the smoke screen of prejudice and replacing it with the empirical data.

Thus, when a patient comes into an analyst's consulting room, he brings with him all his past anxieties, fears, prejudices, and hopes. If he is habitually dominant, he will tend to be dominant toward the analyst. If he is submissive elsewhere, he will be so in analysis. Freud's discovery was that if these ingrained (and generally unrecognized) attitudes and prejudices can be made conscious, they can be modified.

No psychotherapeutic treatment of any thoroughness can bypass a repeated discussion of the relationship of the patient to the analyst, and of the changes that take place in this relationship as treatment progresses. Once again, we owe the discovery of a powerful therapeutic weapon to

completely identify with him. This may seem odd in a man so outspokenly opposed to current thought, but it is surely endearing and a sign of Freud's basic humanity that in his private life he certainly did demand support, both from his wife and later from his pupils. The world owes a great deal to Freud's basic insecurity.

Like other men of genius, Freud possessed a personality compounded of many opposing strands. Perhaps its oddest and most interesting feature was his invariable inclination to reduce everything to the lowest common factor. Freud's psychology has often been criticized by other people— notably Jung—on the grounds that it leaves little room for human aspiration, or even for human goodness. On analytical investigation even the most self-sacrificing action tends to be interpreted as distorted self-interest. Indeed, Freud seemed to take an almost masochistic delight in reducing the whole of human endeavor to aggressive or sexual drives of a most basic and primitive kind. Psychoanalysis is a discipline that allows little room for altruism, romance, or spirituality. In this connection it is significant that Freud was so fond of Jewish humor, which often depends upon the deflation of pretension and the reduction of sentiment to self-interest.

If ever a man was a living example of his own theories, it was Freud. His creative energy and his great capacity for work were sublimations bought at the expense of inhibiting more primitive drives. The expression of both his sexuality and his aggression was severely inhibited. It is said that the most shattering discovery in his self-analysis was his deeply buried hatred of the father he thought he had admired and respected. Throughout his life Freud was particularly patient, tolerant, and kind. He always denied being a genius on the grounds that geniuses were intolerable in the home, and his family, he said, would confirm that he was unusually easy to live with. This was undoubtedly true, but it is probable that it was at the price of a certain lack of playfulness or vitality of a more ordinary kind. Freud seems to have been a markedly controlled man, controlled to a point where he revealed very little of himself, either to his patients or to his acquaintances. In 1909, when his work was first beginning to reach a wider audience, he was asked to lecture at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. He traveled across the Atlantic with two colleagues, Jung and Sandor Ferenczi; and the three men spent a good deal of their time analyzing one another's dreams. While in New York, Freud apparently confided in Jung to the extent of telling him about some of his personal difficulties. An intimate dream came up for discussion, and Jung asked for further associations. But Freud refused to give them, saying, so Jung reported: "I can't give you any further associations, for if I did I might lose my authority." Jung's retort was, "Analysis is excellent, except for the analyst."

Even those who were closest to him, like Ernest Jones, felt that there

were secrets about Freud that they would never know. Jones says of him: "He was beyond doubt someone whose instincts were far more powerful than those of the average man, but whose repressions were even more potent." He also says, "Everything points to a remarkable concealment in Freud's love life." Although aspects of Freud's self-analysis appear in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, there is a great deal about him that we should like to know but that we shall never know. The man who spent his life investigating the secrets of other people more intimately than any man had done before, was very reluctant to reveal his own.

Questions

1. Give some bio details on F. Use at least one outside source.
2. What discovery did F consider his most important?
3. In the letters by F, why does F believe that he must conduct his own self-analysis?
4. Describe F's relationship with his nurse (this term is used to mean someone who took care of F while very young).
5. How did F go about analyzing his dream (about his nurse)?
6. What connection does "reality" play in F analysis of the dream?
7. Did F miss the nurse? What role does the "cupboard" play?
8. What is the Oedipus complex?
9. What role does reason play for F?
10. Explain this sentence: "Western man has become incapable of taking any human behavior at its face value."
11. Define transference.
12. What role do dreams play for F?
13. What is the goal of psychoanalysis?