Psychological Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Psychological Criticism:
Psychological Criticism is concerned with understanding and explaining human nature. When taking a psychological approach to literature, therefore, it is natural to focus on individual characters or types of characters (or anything that reflects human existence) and to examine characters’ conscious and unconscious behavior, actions, motivations, possessions, surroundings, personality traits, perception, imagination, interactions, conversations, relationships, and/or conflicts between characters and within characters, including inherent inconsistencies or contradictions. Observations are discovered and proved by doing a close reading/analysis and interpretation of the text. Thus Psychological Criticism also depends upon the practices and sometimes some of the concepts of New Criticism.

Psychological Criticism has its historical roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Freudian psychoanalytical criticism especially but also in Jungian mythological criticism. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* explains Freudian and Jungian Psychoanalytic Criticism:

Freud’s theories are directly and indirectly concerned with the nature of the unconscious mind, . . . suggesting that the powers motivating men and women are mainly and normally unconscious. He also identified three components of the human psyche: the id, the inborn, unconscious part of the psyche and the source of our instinctual physical (especially libidinal desires); the superego, which internalizes the norms and mores of society and almost seems outside the self, making moral judgments and counseling sacrifice regardless of self-interest; and the ego, the predominantly rational orderly, and conscious part of the psyche that mediates the often competing demands of the id and the superego. The id, insatiable and pleasure-seeking, is ruled by the pleasure principle; the ego, based on the reality principle, must choose between or balance liberation and self-gratification on one hand and censorship and conformity on the other. (411-2)

In contrast to Freud’s focus] on the individual unconscious, . . . Jung [a student of Freud] identified and concentrated on a collective unconscious that, he claimed, is universally shared by people across cultures. According to Jung, this collective unconscious contains racial memories and archetypes, primordial images and patterns, that reflect the elemental content of human experience from its earliest beginnings. (260)

In practicing Psychoanalytic Criticism, you might examine how one or several related terms from one the Freudian or Jungian theories applies to and explains a character, characters, type of characters, or human nature in general in a particular text or texts. (Important terms from both Freudian and Jungian theories are presented and defined in the following pages along with possible questions to help focus one’s reading/writing.) However, the purpose is not just to use the terms or to prove they apply but to use them to reveal, prove, and analyze/interpret the text’s argument about human psychology.

Typically, it is easier and likely to be more successful, especially in short papers like all the ones written for this class, to focus on an individual character (or several similar characters) than to look at different types of characters or generally at human nature. With one character, one can truly delve into his or her motivations, desires, actions, personality traits, prized possessions (as
personal symbols), etc. So one might ask whether the person is typically nurturing, self-destructive, self-centered/selfish, self-effacing, attention or approval-seeking, etc., how, why, and so what. Similarly, one might ask what the character most wants and how he or she demonstrates and acts on this desire and again why and so what.

Remember it is not enough just to describe the character or to list all of your observations; they must be connected to and in support of a unified argument the text is making about him or her or about human nature through him or her. Also, it's important to remember the purpose is not to judge or express personal opinions about the character and/or the character's actions but to understand and explain the character and/or his or her actions.

Final note:
The claim in a Psychological Criticism essay identifies and proves one explanation of (argument about) human nature the text makes. An essay and claim could focus narrowly on one character and an explanation of his or her personality or motivation or interactions, etc., or more broadly on one type of character/motivation, or most broadly on one defining aspect of human nature, according to the text. As with any good claim, it must be specific and unified.

Key Terms/Concepts:

Freudian terminology:

The conscious—the actual contents of awareness; i.e., what one is conscious of at a given moment.

The preconscious—the entire set of contents of the mind accessible to consciousness but not in awareness at the moment, i.e., what is descriptively unconscious but not blocked from access by repression or other psychological defenses.

The unconscious—the vast, unknowable part of the mind or mental processes not accessible to consciousness by direct means, i.e., by turning attention to them. Their existence must thus be inferred through examination of gaps in consciousness, symptoms, dreams, etc. since they are blocked from consciousness by repression.

Censorship—the means of keeping unpleasant (or unsociable) desires out of consciousness. Censorship is circumvented through dreams, parapraxes (or “slips of the tongue”), and figures of speech.

Repression—a way of dealing with painful or unsociable desires; they are relocated in the unconscious where they indirectly continue to influence daily life and dreams.

Libido, instinct, or drive—inmate and biological urge, energy, or desire that is derived from the id and seeks satisfaction in objects. E.g., one might have an “instinctual” desire for food or sex.

The id is centered on instinct, primal biological impulses, pleasures, desires, unchecked urges, and wish fulfillment. It is totally unconscious and internally focused and works according to the pleasure-principle.
The ego—When Freud refers to the ego, he is talking about our conscious self, aware of who we are. The ego helps us deal with reality by mediating among the id, the superego, and the demands of the outside world. The ego prevents us from acting on every urge we have (produced by the id) and being so morally driven (by superego) that we can’t function properly. The ego works according to the reality-principle.

The superego—the largely unconscious part of the personality responsible for moral self-control—roughly, the “conscience.” The super-ego is internalized self-criticism, an internalization of the voice of the father or authority.

The pleasure-principle—the desire for immediate gratification. Quite simply, the pleasure-principle drives one to seek pleasure and to avoid pain.

The reality-principle—the deferral of gratification. As one grows up, one begins to learn the need sometimes to endure pain and to defer gratification because of the exigencies and obstacles of reality.

Sublimation—literally, “raising up” (toward the “sublime”). Freud discusses “sublimation” as a process of redirecting psychical energy from ego-desire (e.g., sexual gratification) to the satisfaction of cultural aims (e.g., work, art, politics).

Ideal demands—the requirements of civilization to live in a way that will contribute to the “perfect” functioning of civilization. E.g., “Love thy neighbor as thy self”

Eros and Thanatos—Freud identifies two drives that both coincide and conflict within the individual and among individuals. Eros is the drive of life, love, creativity, and sexuality, self-satisfaction, and species preservation. Thanatos, from the Greek word for “death” is the drive of aggression, sadism, (self and species) destruction, violence, and death.

Jungian terminology:

Personal conscious—a state of awareness of the present moment. Once that moment has passed, it moves into the realm of the personal unconscious.

Personal unconscious—a storehouse of past personal experience no longer extant in the personal conscious.

Collective unconscious—the inherited experience of the human race that resides at a deep level of the psyche. Its contents come from recurrent life situations that are common to all human beings.

The ego is the conscious mind.

Archetypes—inherited ideas or ways of thinking generated by the experiences of the human race that exist in the unconscious of an individual. They are universal and recurring images, patterns, or motifs that represent typical human experience and often in appear in literature, art, fairy tales, myths, dreams, and rituals, for example, the hero, the scapegoat, the outcast, water, the sun, the quest or journey, death and rebirth, etc.
Shadow—the dark, unattractive aspects of the self that reside in the personal unconscious. An individual’s impulse is to reject the shadow and project it onto someone or something else.

Persona—the social mask that an individual constructs and wears to face others. It is a blending of what the person is and what society expects him or her to be. It is the being that other people know as one’s self.

Anima/Animus is the life force that causes one to act. It is given a feminine designation (anima) in men and a masculine one (animus) in women, indicating that the psyche has both male and female characteristics. While typically a man will identify with and integrate masculine archetypes and their unconscious influences into his personal conscious, he will project the feminine archetypes onto women. Similarly, a woman will typically identify with and integrate feminine archetypes and their influences into her personal conscious and will project the masculine archetypes onto men.

The self—The goal of life is to realize the self (through individuation). The self is the most important archetype and represents the unity of opposites so that every aspect of personality is expressed equally: male and female, ego and shadow, good and bad, conscious and unconscious. When one is young, the focus is on the ego and the trivialities of the persona. When one is older (assuming one has been developing as one should), the focus is a little deeper, on the self, and the individual becomes closer to all people, all life, even the universe itself. The self-realized person is actually less selfish.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Preparing to Write a Psychological Criticism Paper:

What are a particular character’s main trait or traits? What main traits does the protagonist or antagonist exhibit? In what behavior or speech patterns, perceptions/thoughts, or descriptions of the character, etc. are these traits manifested?

How self-aware is the character? Are the characters’ behaviors and treatment of others conscious or unconscious? How do you know? What indicates the character’s awareness/purposefulness or lack thereof?

Does the character seem to resemble a particular archetype?

How does the character see him or herself? How do others perceive him or her? Does his/her self-perception match others’ perceptions of him or her?

Does the character change? How? To what extent? Does the character’s understanding or self-awareness grow or change? How? To what extent? In what do you see this change or growth? What causes it?

What images or symbols are associated with the character?

What experiences and relationships have affected the character and made him/her the person s/he is?

Does the character have any internal conflicts? Is s/he at war with him or herself? Over what?
What motivates the character? What does the character (most) want from a significant other or society? How does the character go about getting what s/he wants?

Is the character self-destructive?

Is the character self-aggrandizing or self-deprecating or self-sacrificing? To what extent? What demonstrates this attitude toward self?
Lisa Esther

Yanover

English 123

Sample Response Paper: Applying Psychological Criticism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Examined through the lens of Psychological Criticism, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

Tessie Hutchinson, the victim, doesn’t emerge blameless either. Her status as victim makes her pitiable but no less culpable for the barbaric ritual she participates in, seemingly without protest or questioning, up until the moment she personally is at risk. Tessie’s role helps reveal and explain Shirley Jackson’s view of human nature and understanding of why injustice happens and continues to happen because of human nature. The individual’s fear of the mob, of the repercussions of being singled out and ostracized by it and thus made vulnerable to it, is at the heart of the individual’s silence and inaction. At the end of the story, the individual’s fears seem justified as we see “Tessie Hutchinson . . . in the center of a cleared space, . . . her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her” (969), her final protest unheeded, unheard.
What Jackson is revealing and condemning is the complete lack of protest earlier. It’s not that she doesn’t understand the villagers’ collective and individual silence; the individual has reason to fear the mob. The mob is large—two hundred ninety-nine people large, in this case—and the individual is (made to feel) powerless, dependent on belonging to that community/mob for protection but then also subject to its laws and customs. This practice of making the individual dependent on society (and mindful of that dependence) is ancient, dating back to Anglo-Saxon law in which, being found guilty of a crime, an individual could be labeled an “outlaw” and thus removed from the protection of the law, meaning anyone could kill him or her without fear of retribution, and indeed this practice seems to be what the ritual of “The Lottery” is enacting though not in response to any crime or wrongdoing on the part of the individual, simply as a matter of course, of tradition, but ultimately to keep the individual in line. Ironically, the need to instill this fear in the individual reveals society’s implicit belief that the uncontrolled individual is to be feared. So Jackson hints at the potential of the individual to voice protest and enact change but simultaneously highlights the fear and selfishness that make that action impossible. Tessie Hutchinson does protest but too late, only after she has been made an outcast, which effectively silences her; she is dead to the community before the first stone hits her. Because her voice is no longer one of theirs, the villagers do not hear her protest, and because her protest is not against the larger injustice but selfishly motivated, the reader does not hear it either. Thus Jackson points to human nature as the root cause of the perpetuation of human savagery.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the
villagers. Haven't we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson's final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson's appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.