

Program Brief

“HOW IS FREUD RELEVANT TODAY?”

Lecture by

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May 18, 2004

Amerika Haus, Vienna

Background information provided by the
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Peter L. Rudnytsky is Professor of English at the University of Florida and the Editor of *American Imago*. He is the author or editor of numerous books, including *Freud and Oedipus* (1987), *The Psychoanalytic Vocation: Rank, Winnicott, and the Legacy of Freud* (1991), *Psychoanalytic Conversations: Interviews with Clinicians, Commentators, and Critics* (2000), and *Reading Psychoanalysis: Freud, Rank, Ferenczi, Groddeck* (2002), for which he received the 2003 Gradiva Award. In Vienna he will conduct a seminar on "Freud Translations," comparing the new volumes of the Penguin Freud edition and the *Standard Edition* with the German originals.

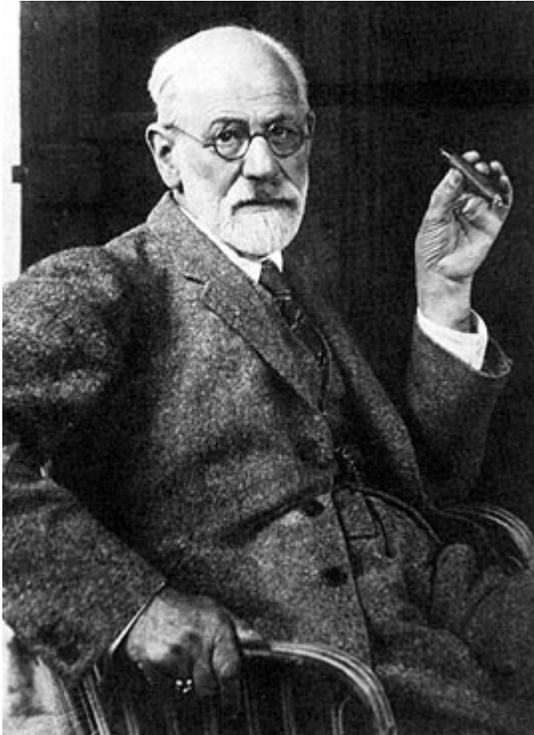
[Sigmund Freud-Museum Wien/Vienna](http://www.freud-museum.at)

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Sigmund Freud

Source: *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 Vols. Gale Research, 1998.



Birth: May 6, 1856 in Freiberg, Moravia (now Czech Republic)

Death: September 23, 1939 in London, England

Nationality: Austrian

Occupation: psychologist, author, psychoanalyst

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, marked the beginning of a modern, dynamic psychology by providing the first systematic explanation of the inner mental forces determining human behavior.

Early in his career Sigmund Freud distinguished himself as a histologist, neuropathologist, and clinical neurologist, and in his later life he was acclaimed as a talented writer and essayist. However, his fame is based on his work in expanding man's knowledge of himself through clinical researches and corresponding development of theories to explain the new data. He laid the foundations for modern understanding of unconscious mental processes (processes excluded from awareness), neurosis (a type of mental disorder), the sexual life of infants, and the interpretation of dreams. Under his guidance, psychoanalysis became the dominant modern theory of human psychology and a major tool of research, as well as an important method of psychiatric treatment which currently has thousands of practitioners all over the world. The application of psychoanalytic thinking to the studies of history, anthropology, religion, art, sociology, and education has greatly changed these fields.

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856, in Freiberg, Moravia (now Czechoslovakia). Sigmund was the first child of his twice-widowed father's third marriage. His mother, Amalia Nathanson, was 19 years old when she married Jacob Freud, aged 39. Sigmund's two stepbrothers from his father's first marriage were approximately the same age as his mother, and his older stepbrother's son, Sigmund's nephew, was his earliest playmate. Thus the boy grew up in an unusual family structure, his mother halfway in age between himself and his father. Though seven younger children were born, Sigmund always remained his mother's favorite. When he was 4, the family moved to Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and one of the great cultural, scientific, and medical centers of Europe. Freud lived in Vienna until a year before his death.

Youth in Vienna

Because the Freuds were Jewish, Sigmund's early experience was that of an outsider in an overwhelmingly Catholic community. However, Emperor Francis Joseph had emancipated the Jews of Austria, giving them equal rights and permitting them to settle anywhere in the monarchy. Many Jewish families came to Vienna, where the standard of living was higher and educational and professional opportunities better than in the provinces. The Jewish people have always had a strong interest in cultural and intellectual pursuits; this, along with Austria's remaining barriers to social acceptance and progress in academic careers, was influential in Freud's early vocational interests. Had it been easier for him to gain academic success, it might have been more difficult for the young scientist to develop and, later, to defend his unpopular theories.

Although as he grew older Freud never practiced Judaism as a religion, his Jewish cultural background and tradition were important influences on his thinking. He considered himself Jewish and maintained contact with Jewish organizations; one of his last works was a study of Moses and the Jewish people. However, at times Freud was unhappy that the psychoanalytic movement was so closely tied to Jewish intellectualism.

Freud went to the local elementary school and attended the humanistic high school (or gymnasium) from 1866 to 1873. He studied Greek and Latin, mathematics, history, and the natural sciences, and was a superior student.

He passed his final examination with flying colors, qualifying to enter the University of Vienna at the age of 17. His family had recognized his special scholarly gifts from the beginning, and although they had only four bedrooms for eight people, Sigmund had his own room throughout his school days. He lived with his parents until he was 27, as was the custom at that time.

Prepsychoanalytic Work

Freud first considered studying law but then enrolled in medical school. Vienna had become the world capital of medicine, and the young student was initially attracted to the laboratory and the scientific side of medicine rather than clinical practice. He spent 7 instead of the usual 5 years acquiring his doctorate, taking time to work in the zoological and anatomical laboratories of the famous Ernst Brucke. At 19 he conducted his first independent research project while on a field trip, and at 20 he published his first scientific paper.

Freud received his doctor of medicine degree at the age of 24. An episode at about this time reveals that he was not simply the "good boy" his academic career might suggest: he spent his twenty-fourth birthday in prison, having gone AWOL from his military training. For the next few years he pursued his laboratory work, but several factors shifted his interest from microscopic studies to living patients. Opportunities for advancement in academic medicine were rare at best, and his Jewish background was a decided disadvantage. More important, he fell in love and wanted to marry, but the stipends available to a young scientist could not support a wife and family. He had met Martha Bernays, the daughter of a well-known Hamburg family, when he was 26; they were engaged 2 months later. They were separated during most of the 4 years which preceded their marriage, and Freud's over 900 letters to his fiancée provide a good deal of information about his life and personality. They were married in 1887. Of their six children, a daughter, Anna, became one of her father's most famous followers.

Freud spent 3 years as a resident physician in the famous Allgemeine Krankenhaus, a general hospital that was the medical center of Vienna. He rotated through a number of clinical services and spent 5 months in the psychiatry department headed by Theodor Meynert. Psychiatry at this time was static and descriptive. A patient's signs and symptoms were carefully observed and recorded in the hope that they would lead to a correct diagnosis of the organic disease of the brain, which was assumed to be the basis of all psychopathology (mental disorder). The psychological meaning of behavior was not itself considered important; behavior was only a set of symptoms to be studied in order to understand the structures of the brain. Freud's later work revolutionized this attitude; yet like all scientific revolutions, this one grew from a thorough understanding and acknowledged expertise in the traditional methods. He later published widely respected papers on neurology and brain functioning, including works on cerebral palsy in children and aphasia (disturbances in understanding and using words).

Another of Freud's early medical interests brought him to the brink of international acclaim. During his residency he became interested in the effect of an alkaloid extract on the nervous system.

He experimented on himself and others and found that small doses of the drug, cocaine, were effective against fatigue. He published a paper describing his findings and also participated in the discovery of cocaine's effect as a local anesthetic. However, he took a trip to visit his fiancée before he could publish the later findings, and during his absence a colleague reported the use of cocaine as an anesthetic for surgery on the eye. Freud's earlier findings were overshadowed, and later fell into disrepute when the addictive properties of cocaine became known.

During the last part of his residency Freud received a grant to pursue his neurological studies abroad. He spent 4 months at the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris, studying under the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot. Here Freud first became interested in hysteria and Charcot's demonstration of its psychological origins. Thus, in fact, Freud's development of a psychoanalytic approach to mental disorders was rooted in 19th-century neurology rather than in the psychiatry of the era.

Beginning of Psychoanalysis

Freud returned to Vienna, established himself in the private practice of neurology, and married. He soon devoted his efforts to the treatment of hysterical patients with the help of hypnosis, a technique he had studied under Charcot. Joseph Breuer, an older colleague who had become Freud's friend and mentor, told Freud about a hysterical patient whom he had treated successfully by hypnotizing her and then tracing her symptoms back to traumatic (emotionally stressful) events she had experienced at her father's deathbed. Breuer called his treatment "catharsis" and attributed its effectiveness to the release of "pent-up emotions." Freud's experiments with Breuer's technique were successful, demonstrating that hysterical symptoms could consistently be traced to highly emotional experiences which had been "repressed," that is, excluded from conscious memory. Together with Breuer he published *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), which included several theoretical chapters, a series of Freud's cases, and Breuer's initial case. At the age of 39 Freud first used the term "psychoanalysis," and his major lifework was well under way.

At about this time Freud began a unique undertaking, his own self-analysis, which he pursued primarily by analyzing his dreams. As he proceeded, his personality changed. He developed a greater inner security while his at times impulsive emotional responses decreased. A major scientific result was *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1901). In this book he demonstrated that the dreams of every man, just like the symptoms of a hysterical or an otherwise neurotic person, serve as a "royal road" to the understanding of unconscious mental processes, which have great importance in determining behavior. By the turn of the century Freud had increased his knowledge of the formation of neurotic symptoms to include conditions and reactions other than hysteria. He had also developed his therapeutic technique, dropping the use of hypnosis and shifting to the more effective and more widely applicable method of "free association."

Development of Psychoanalysis

Following his work on dreams Freud wrote a series of papers in which he explored the influence of unconscious mental processes on virtually every aspect of human behavior: slips of the tongue and simple errors of memory (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1901); humor (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905); artistic creativity (*Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, 1910); and cultural institutions (*Totem and Taboo*, 1912). He recognized that predominant among the unconscious forces which lead to neuroses are the sexual desires of early childhood that have been excluded from conscious awareness, yet have preserved their dynamic force within the personality. He described his highly controversial views concerning infantile sexuality in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), a work which initially met violent protest but was gradually accepted by practically all schools of psychology. During this period he also published a number of case histories and a series of articles dealing with psychoanalysis as a therapy.

After 1902 Freud gathered a small group of interested people on Wednesday evenings for presentation of psychoanalytic papers and discussion. This was the beginning of the psychoanalytic movement. Swiss psychiatrists Eugen Bleuler and Carl Jung formed a study group in Zurich in 1907, and the first International Psychoanalytic Congress was held in Salzburg in 1908. In 1909 Freud was invited to give five lectures at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. He considered this invitation the first official recognition to be extended to his new science.

The new science was not without its difficulties. Earlier, Freud and Breuer had differed concerning their findings with regard to the role of sexual wishes in neurosis. Breuer left psychoanalysis, and the two men parted scientific company, not without some personal animosity. Ironically, Breuer saved his reputation at the time, only to be remembered by later generations because of his brief collaboration with Freud. During his self-analysis Freud developed a strong personal attachment to a philosophically inclined German otolaryngological physician, Wilhelm Fliess. From their letters one observes a gradual cooling of the friendship as Freud's self-analysis progressed.

At the same time Freud faced a major scientific reversal. He first thought that his neurotic patients had actually experienced sexual seductions in childhood, but he then realized that his patients were usually describing childhood fantasies (wishes) rather than actual events. He retracted his earlier statement on infantile sexuality, yet demonstrated his scientific genius when he rejected neither the data nor the theory but reformulated both. He now saw that the universal sexual fantasies of children were scientifically far more important than an occasional actual seduction by an adult. Later, as psychoanalysis became better established, several of Freud's closest colleagues broke with him and established splinter groups of their own, some of which continue to this day. Of such workers in the field, Jung, Alfred Adler, Otto Rank, and Wilhelm Reich are the best known.

Later Years

In 1923 Freud developed a cancerous growth in his mouth that led to his death 16 years and 33 operations later. In spite of this, these were years of great scientific productivity. He published findings on the importance of aggressive as well as sexual drives (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920); developed a new theoretical framework in order to organize his new data concerning the structure of the mind (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923); revised his theory of anxiety to show it as the signal of danger emanating from unconscious fantasies, rather than the result of repressed sexual feelings (*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, 1926); and discussed religion, civilized society, and further questions of theory and technique.

In March 1938 Austria was occupied by German troops, and that month Freud and his family were put under house arrest. Through the combined efforts of Marie Bonaparte, Princess of Greece, British psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, and W. C. Bullitt, the American ambassador to France (who obtained assistance from President Franklin D. Roosevelt), the Freuds were permitted to leave Austria in June. Freud's keen mind and ironic sense of humor were evident when, forced to flee his home at the age of 82, suffering from cancer, and in mortal danger, he was asked to sign a document attesting that he had been treated well by the Nazi authorities; he added in his own handwriting, "I can most warmly recommend the Gestapo to anyone." Freud spent his last year in London, undergoing surgery. He died on Sept. 23, 1939. The influence of his discoveries on the science and culture of the 20th century is incalculable.

Personal Life

Freud's personal life has been a subject of interest to admirers and critics. When it seemed necessary to advance his science, he exposed himself mercilessly, and, particularly in the early years, his own mental functioning was the major subject matter of psychoanalysis. Still, he was an intensely private man, and he made several attempts to thwart future biographers by destroying personal papers. However, his scientific work, his friends, and his extensive correspondence allow historians to paint a vivid picture.

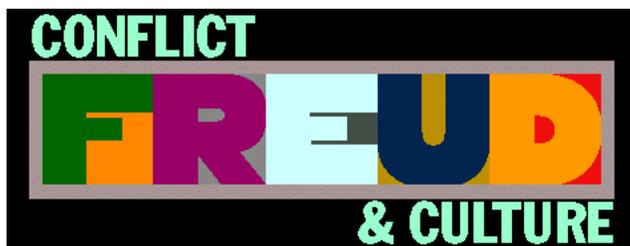
Freud was an imposing man, although physically small. He read extensively, loved to travel, and was an avid collector of archeological curiosities. Though interested in painting, the musical charms of Vienna had little attraction for him. He collected mushrooms and was an expert on them. Devoted to his family, he always practiced in a consultation room attached to his home. He valued a small circle of close friends and enjoyed a weekly game of cards with them. He was intensely loyal to his friends and inspired loyalty in a circle of disciples that persists to this day.

FURTHER READINGS

- The best English translation of Freud's works is *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* edited by James Strachey (24 vols., 1953-1964). Many of Freud's works have been published separately in other English-language editions. His brief *An Autobiographical Study* (1925), volume 20 of the standard edition, concentrates on his scientific work and almost ignores his personal life. More of his life is revealed, in a fragmented and incomplete way, in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, volumes 4 and 5 of the standard edition. Freud's personality emerges most clearly from his letters, available in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, selected and edited by Ernst L. Freud and translated by Tania and James Stern (1960). For an introduction to Freud's thought and style in his own words, the reader should begin with Freud's Clark University lectures, the *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (trans. 1920), or *Problems of Lay-analysis* (1927).
- The definitive biography of Freud is Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (3 vols., 1953-1957), also available in a one-volume edition edited and abridged by Lionel Trilling and Steven Marcus (1961). A balanced, somewhat negative discussion, which views Freud in relation to his predecessors and contemporaries, is Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (1970).

[Sigmund Freud: Conflict & Culture](http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/freud/)

(<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/freud/>)
Library of Congress Exhibition



Few figures have had so decisive and fundamental an influence on the course of modern cultural history as Sigmund Freud. Yet few figures also have inspired such sustained controversy and intense debate. Freud's legacy continues to be hotly contested, as demonstrated by the controversy attracted by this exhibition even before its opening. Our notions of identity, memory, childhood, sexuality, and, most generally, of meaning have been shaped in relation to - and often in opposition to - Freud's work. The exhibition examines Freud's life and his key ideas and their effect upon the twentieth century.

Please visit the homepage of the U.S. Embassy Vienna, Austria at: <http://www.usembassy.at>



The program page on **“How Is Freud Relevant Today?”** will be available at: <http://www.usembassy.at/en/embassy/photo/freud.htm>

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