

Totem and Taboo

Discussion Questions

Psychoanalytic terms absolutely worth the time and effort it takes to learn and understand them: *Unconscious, Collective Unconscious, Libido, Ego, Id, Superego, Oedipus Complex, Oral Stage, Anal Stage, Genital Stage, Mirror Stage, Ambivalence, Association, Repression, Condensation, Transference, Displacement, Compensation, Projection, Latent Content, Manifest Content, Primal Horde.*

The whole point of this book in one paragraph: “one day the expelled brothers joined forces, slew and ate the father, and thus put an end to the father horde... the totem feast, which is perhaps mankind’s first celebration, would be the repetition and commemoration of this memorable, criminal act with which so many things began, social organization, moral restrictions and religion” (p. 122).

1. What relationship does Freud’s personal biography have to the ‘Oedipus Complex’ (p. vii)?
2. What are the “civilized races of today [1918]” that Brill refers to in the introduction?
3. Do you feel comfortable comparing the historical cultures of “primitive races” to the psychology of children, women, dreams, and mentally ill men? This is the absolute foundation-stone and bedrock of psychoanalysis. Comment.
4. What are “mental and emotional maladjustments to one’s environment” (p. xi)?
5. Does the “stamp of degeneration” (p. xi) sound familiar to you from the race unit? Comment.
6. What do you think of the argument that humor and comedy are the product of unconscious mental activity, a way to “obtain pleasure from forbidden sources” (p. xii)?
7. What do you think of “the struggle with reality, the constant effort to adjust one’s primitive feelings to the demands of civilization” (p. xii)—especially as this sentence was written during the age of unashamed European and American colonialism and imperialism? Can that historical context ever be separated out from the origins of psychoanalysis?
8. Explain: “the unconscious mental activity which is made up of repressed infantile material forever strives to express itself” (p. xii).
9. Explain: “the childhood of the individual showed a marked resemblance to the primitive history or the childhood of races” (p. xii).
10. What is the (so-called) difference between “legends, myths, and fairytales” and “great cultural institutions” (p. xiii)? Is it race? Social class? Who conquered who?
11. What is a “remnant of a way of thinking that survives in us” (p. 1) from so-called primitive humanity?
12. Explain: “in a certain sense he is still our contemporary: there are people whom we consider more closely related to primitive man than ourselves, in whom we therefore recognize the direct descendants and representatives of earlier man. We can thus judge the so-called savage and semi-savage races; their psychic life assumes a particular interest for us, for we can recognize in their psychic life a well-preserved, early stage of our own development” (p. 1).
13. Why might we “not expect that these poor, naked cannibals should be moral in their sex life according to our ideas” (p. 2). Who is the ‘we’ Freud is assuming as his reader?
14. Note Freud’s unquestioned assumption that “totemism also once existed among the aboriginal Aryan and Semitic races of Europe” (p. 3n2). What is going on in that sentence?
15. Freud suggests that totemism, a basic human religious impulse, comes from the incest prohibition. Comment.
16. Explain what “a man of the wrong clan who uses her as his wife” (p. 4) and “putting a woman of the same totem to sexual uses” (p. 104) means—and also what it says about Freud’s gender assumptions.

17. You do realize, of course, that incest, generally the sexual abuse of children by parents and other family members, is extremely common—even today—in the United States? Why doesn't anyone talk about it?
18. Psychoanalysis, historically, is a double-edged sword when talking about the distinction between so-called 'civilized' (white, upper middle and upper class, male) people and so-called 'primitive' (non-white, lower middle and lower class, female) people, obviously involved in perpetrating and justifying historical oppressions, but also simultaneously acknowledging that all 'civilized' humans have fundamental aspects of 'primitive' humans always already in their minds, albeit unconsciously—an insight that leads in many cases to tacit acknowledgment of shared humanity and the rehumanization of the dehumanized. Comment.
19. Why is Freud so androcentric about everything? Is this what not being a feminist looks like?
20. Explain: "it is assumed without question by these races that a man and a woman left alone together will indulge in the most extreme intimacy" (p. 10)
21. Explain: "a girl must carefully avoid her own father between the time of her puberty and her marriage" (p. 10).
22. Can you imagine someone believing that there are basically two categories of people—1) the upper middle and upper class white men of Europe and America, and 2) everyone else on the planet, including upper middle and upper class white women and children (and mentally ill men)—and that the first category is 'civilized' and the second 'primitive'? Comment.
23. Explain: "this race abominates incest to such an extent as not to let it go unpunished even among domestic animals" (p. 12).
24. Explain: "although laws of avoidance no longer exist in the society of the white races of Europe and America, much quarreling and displeasure would often be avoided if they did exist and did not have to be reestablished by individuals. Many a European will see an act of high wisdom in the laws of avoidance which savage races have established to preclude any understanding between two persons who have become so closely related... emotional relations between mother-in-law and son-in-law are controlled by components which stand in sharp contrast to each other. I mean that the relation is really 'ambivalent', that is, it is composed of conflicting feelings of tenderness and hostility" (p. 13).
25. What view does Freud appear to have of marriage in the following passage—"where the psychosexual needs of the woman are to be satisfied in marriage and family life, there is always the danger of dissatisfaction through the premature termination of the conjugal relation, and the monotony in the wife's emotional life. The aging mother protects herself against this by living through the lives of her children by identifying herself with them and making their emotional experiences her own. Parents are said to remain young with their children, and this is, in fact, one of the most valuable psychic benefits which parents derive from their children. Childlessness thus eliminates one of the best means to endure the necessary resignation imposed upon the individual through marriage" (pp. 13-14)?
26. Explain: "the path of object selection has normally led him to his love object through the image of his mother and perhaps of his sister; in consequence of the incest barriers his preference for these two beloved persons of his childhood has been deflected and he is then able to find their image in strange objects" (p. 14).
27. Explain: "it not infrequently happens that a man falls in love with his subsequent mother-in-law before his inclination is transferred to her daughter" (p. 14).
28. Explain: "the incestuous fixations of the libido still play or again are playing the main role in his unconscious psychic life" (p. 15).
29. Explain: "such a rejection is above all the product of man's deep aversion to his former incest wishes which have since succumbed to repression" (p. 15).
30. Explain: "the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean... taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions. Our combination of 'holy dread' would often express the meaning of taboo" (p. 16).
31. What gender and social class assumptions are encoded in this sentence: "safeguarding of the weak—women, children, and common people generally" (p. 17).
32. Explain: "the violated taboo avenged itself" (p. 18).