

# The Influence of Sigmund Freud's Clark Lectures on American Concepts of the Self

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**Abstract:** The following paper assesses the impact of the five lectures given by Sigmund Freud during his brief stay in America in 1909. I will argue that the talks he presented mark a distinct shift in American self-understanding: American approaches to mental illness had been based on the so-called somatic style, which held a purely mechanistic view of the human mind and body, thus treating only the symptoms of apparent psychological ailments. Acknowledging the psyche as a factor in its own right, psychoanalysis greatly challenged American ideas, and Freud's theories about infantile sexuality undermined the contemporary American emphasis on Civilized Morality. After his departure, a heated controversy ensued among professionals in the US. However, in the wake of Freud's lectures, American psychiatrist James J. Putnam turned his back on the somatic style he had previously practiced. In the winter of 1909-10, Putnam set out to defend the concept of psychoanalysis among his American colleagues and thus prepared the ground for its acceptance into the mainstream of US psychology. Simultaneously, Freud's theories underwent a significant Americanization and, in turn, freed American society from the constraints of a Puritan morality and gave the nation a new sense of self-awareness.

**W**e have not had to go out and seek culture; culture has been brought to us, by various benevolent invaders from across the seas" (Sanford 49). Upon reading this striking assessment in an article dedicated to the impact of psychoanalysis on American psychology, it is easy to wonder to which extent American concepts of the self have been influenced by visitors from abroad. Is today's widespread sense of self-awareness in the United States the result of an uninterrupted evolution of American thought, or did influential

European thinkers continue to permeate the way in which Americans see themselves—as they did throughout the beginnings of the young nation’s history?<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, a not-yet-very-well-known Viennese physician by the name of Sigmund Freud was invited to lecture at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the occasion of the institution’s twentieth anniversary. Despite the fact that this rather brief stay constituted his only visit to the American continent, I will argue in this paper that Freud’s introduction of psychoanalysis to the academic community in the US permanently changed the American outlook on mental health and mental illness. To this end, I will begin by looking at the prevalent views on these topics as represented by late Victorian society around 1900. I will then proceed to analyze how Freud was first perceived by members of the intellectual elite in the US. Consequently, my paper will try to reveal the motives behind his invitation by the president of Clark University in 1909.

After considering Freud’s reactions to those proposals, I will examine the content of his “Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis” and try to summarize their immediate reception by the attending audience.

The second part of my work focuses on the repercussions of the Clark lectures by the foremost scientists of that time. In this context, I will discuss the comprehensive critique of Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis by one of his contemporaries, the American psychologist James J. Putnam. As one of the founders of the former dominant style in psychiatry, Putnam offers an enlightening insight into his personal shift from a mechanistic to an analytical understanding of the human mind. Finally, I will delineate how Freud’s thinking permanently altered both theory and practice of psychology in the United States and show how psychoanalysis continued to exert a significant influence on the American consciousness long after the death of its Austrian founder.

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1 At this point, I am thinking of the influence of European scholars who visited America during the colonial era, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, but also of political philosophers whose values were widely adopted throughout the earlier history of the US, e.g. John Locke.

### AMERICAN SELF-AWARENESS IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Before the turn of the last century, American society was characterized by what came to be known as “civilized morality,” which represented a model of demeanor rooted in Puritanism. As Hale<sup>2</sup> points out, the dominant concept restricted sexual intercourse to married men and women and demanded strict chastity as well as “purity of thought and behavior” (25). Hale’s analysis subsequently demonstrates that the dominant middle class needed this moral code with its emphasis on absolute personal control as a reinforcement of the prevalent economical and social model (29-35). This ethical ideal was associated with a distinct approach to the concept of mental disorder. The so-called somatic style assumed that all psychological illnesses were either rooted in organic ailments or hysterical in origin and had to be treated solely on the basis of their symptoms (Hale 48).

Pioneer neurologists such as James J. Putnam or Silas W. Mitchell thus transferred mental illnesses from the realm of insanity to that of an uncontrolled sickness. Since hysteric patients often stemmed from the middle classes, physicians of the era took great care to stress the fact that mental disorders had nothing to do with an alleged loss of self-discipline on the part of the afflicted individual. The somatic style encouraged a purely mechanistic view of the human psyche and simply dismissed the emotional aspects of human life. Yet, as Hale notes, not all contemporaries agreed with this automatist interpretation of man; to emphasize his point, Hale’s book quotes an exclamation by William James in which the latter sharply criticizes the current psychiatric method: “In a word, feeling constitutes the ‘unscientific’ half of existence” (54).

Around 1900, the biological determinism in neurology and psychiatry stumbled into a major crisis. Recovery rates for patients with mental disorders dropped sharply despite the availability of somatic treatment, and the lacking empirical evidence for brain lesions in patients with *dementia praecox* and other mental illnesses deeply challenged the fundamental postulates of somatic theory. According to Hale, the early twentieth century was also the time when scientists

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2 In my entire paper, I rely heavily on Hale’s book, simply because he seems to me the single most-recognized authority regarding Freud’s influence in America; in all other works I have read preparing this analysis, I have always found at the very least one or two references that directly pointed to his work.

began to consider the importance of social environment on the individual as opposed to the former emphasis on hereditary influences alone (72-83).

The impending decline of the somatic style became evident around the time of Freud's Clark visit. In 1904, James J. Putnam, one of the founding fathers of the earlier psychiatric method, came to advocate the consideration of the "function of the organism as a whole" (Hale 92). The discovery of the unconscious by scholars such as Morton Prince and William James decidedly contributed to the new attention for psychopathology with its startling experiments in hypnosis. It is in this context that Granville Stanley Hall, first president of Clark University, undertook his first ventures into the domain of evolutionary psychology. He subsequently decided to specialize in the field of childhood development, which also played a large role in the theories of Sigmund Freud.<sup>3</sup>

#### **THE HALL-FREUD LETTERS: INVITATIONS TO CLARK AND REACTIONS THEREON**

As the twentieth anniversary of Clark University was approaching in 1909, its president aimed to reunite international scholars of the highest recognition to celebrate the success of his institute of higher learning. His strong wish to include the Austrian psychoanalyst among the guest speakers for the ceremony gives proof of the progressive spirit that permeated Hall's era of leadership, simply because "psychoanalysis at that time was in no way a recognized science, but rather a very controversial movement" (Lesky 374). As the collection of correspondence presented by Saul Rosenzweig<sup>4</sup> shows, Hall's first letter to Freud dates from December 15, 1908; it invited the latter to participate in the jubilee celebrations which were to take place in July of the following year. The American academic offered his Viennese colleague a compensation of \$400 and bade him to come in order to shift the study of abnormal psychology in the US

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3 For a more detailed discussion of Hall's professional background, see the first chapter of Rosenzweig's book.

4 Rosenzweig dedicates an entire section of his work to a (verbatim) reprint of the letters exchanged between Freud and Hall prior to and after the Austrian's Clark visit. Since this represents the only complete collection of correspondence I am aware of, I use Rosenzweig's book to refer to the Freud-Hall letters.

## The Influence of Sigmund Freud's Clark Lectures on American Concepts of the Self

“from the exclusively somatic and neurological to a more psychological basis” (Rosenzweig 339).

Freud's reply came promptly (it is dated December 29, 1908) and in the form of a letter of refusal (ibid. 342). He justified this with his patients' yearly schedule of summer vacations that forced him to take off August and September. He therefore claimed that he could not afford to lose additional income by closing his office three weeks earlier than usual in July. Even though this was very likely the case, further evidence points to the fact that Freud was reluctant to accept Hall's proposal due to other personal motives. Eveline List<sup>5</sup> draws our attention to a letter Freud wrote to his Hungarian friend and colleague Sándor Ferenczi in January 1909, stating that he feared “the prudery of the new continent” (68). Yet, the diffusion of his theory of psychoanalysis to the New World was the next logical step for Freud to undertake. As List's article underlines, the Austrian psychiatrist had, after all, already managed to supervise the institutionalization of his concept throughout most of the European continent (71-72).

Unwilling to accept Freud's refusal, the president of Clark University wrote a second letter to Vienna two months later (Rosenzweig 343). This time, he had raised the honorarium to \$750, postponed the invitation to the first week of September, and added the promise of an honorary degree from his institution which was to be bestowed upon his Austrian colleague at the end of the celebration.<sup>6</sup> This message managed to overcome Freud's hesitations, and he finally accepted to embark on his first—and only—visit to the United States. There is a great amount of agreement among scholars today that the degree, a Doctor of Laws, attached to Hall's offer played a large role in Freud's final decision, considering that it was the first and only honor of its kind that was ever awarded to him. As List points out, it received a special place on the wall of Freud's Viennese waiting room after his return from Massachusetts and remained there for the rest of his days as a practicing analyst (67). The original citation reads:

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5 In quoting List, I provide my own translation from the German original.

6 It is significant to note that the first part of the Clark anniversary celebration took place in the form of a conference on childhood development and was held on the originally-intended date in July. However, Hall decided to split the ceremony into two parts so that more guest lecturers (including Freud) could attend—even though this meant that the psychoanalyst could not directly support Hall's theories on infantile sexuality.

Sigmund Freud of the University of Vienna; founder of a school of psychology already rich in new methods and achievements; leader today among students of the psychology of sex, and of psychotherapy and analysis; Doctor of Laws. (Rosenzweig 199-200)

Yet another important argument that likely played in favor of Freud's final decision to come to Worcester is highlighted by List: his wish to introduce his protégée Carl Gustav Jung to the scientific community in America (72).

In surprising contrast to the self-assertive manner in which Freud presented himself in his theoretical publications, his anticipation of the Clark visit shows a great amount of reticence. In one of the later letters to Hall, he humbly remarked on being grateful for having "aroused the interest of many individuals" over his upcoming visit; yet, this fact also filled him with "concern as to whether I can succeed in offering something that will come up to these expectations" (Rosenzweig 349). To the reader who is familiar with Freud's psychoanalytic writings, it seems almost ironic that the Austrian physician seemed to need the reassurance of his host for his upcoming stay. However, Hall did his best to make his guest feel welcome and stated in early August that "there is a wide and deep interest in your coming to this country, and you will have the very best experts within a wide radius" (*ibid.* 351).

#### **SIGMUND FREUD AT THE CLARK CONFERENCE**

After having crossed the Atlantic Ocean by ship in late August of 1909, Freud arrived in New York City with his associates, the Hungarian psychoanalyst Dr Sándor Ferenczi and the Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung. They were received in New York by the American psychiatrist Abraham A. Brill and spent a week visiting the city. Finally, they were joined by the Welsh psychoanalyst Ernest Jones for their trip to Massachusetts. Once in Worcester, they met with their host Granville S. Hall, and the Clark festivities started as scheduled on September 6, 1909. Altogether, twenty-nine notable lecturers participated in the ceremony surrounding Clark University's twentieth anniversary; together, they represented the entire scope of science at the time. Along with Freud and Jung, Rosenzweig enumerates six other behavioral

## The Influence of Sigmund Freud's Clark Lectures on American Concepts of the Self

scientists that all emphasized the role of the individual, sharply refuted hereditary theory, and pointed to the importance of empiric evidence in psychology (124).

Sigmund Freud's lectures were titled "On the Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis" and were held in five parts between September 6 and September 11. The physician spoke every morning at 11:00 a.m. and presented his topics spontaneously and in German<sup>7</sup>. It was only later and in response to a request by Hall that Freud took the time to write down the content of his lectures. According to List's description of events at the conference, Freud made it a habit to go for a walk with his colleague Ferenczi each morning and thereby decided on the subject of his upcoming talk (76). The publicized version differs from the lectures as they were delivered mainly in reference to the sequence of the presented themes.<sup>8</sup> As a whole, Freud's Clark lectures greatly accentuated the "practicality, optimism, the . . . simplicity of psychoanalysis" (Hale 5). Freud's lecturing style was marked by an astonishing degree of rhetoric talent in conjunction with a number of practical examples and analogies which gave them a strikingly entertaining quality.

His first three lectures rendered a basic overview of the roots and fundamentals of his theory. In Freud's first speech, he addressed the origins of psychoanalysis and thereby modestly credited his Austrian collaborator Josef Breuer with the discovery of the "talking cure": "if merit is due to the originator of psychoanalysis, the merit is not mine" (qtd. in Rosenzweig 397). Freud's second lecture proceeded to contrast his new therapeutic method with earlier practices of hypnosis. Furthermore, it exposed inner conflicts between personal wishes and the moral values of society as the main cause of mental disorders because these wishes had to be repressed within the self, only to manifest themselves later in the form of hysterical symptoms (Rosenzweig 407-13). The third lecture described the properties of free association as a psychological mechanism and emphasized its centrality for the psychoanalytic method. At this

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7 Since German was the official language of science in those days, Freud's listeners were able to understand the physician as he delivered the lectures in his native tongue. His thoughts were later translated by his American colleague Dr Abraham A. Brill, who published the first English version in the US over the course of the following year.

8 For a discussion of reasons, see Rosenzweig 128-34. In my analysis of the lectures, I will refer to the written version of Freud's lectures as they are reprinted in Part three of Rosenzweig's book, since this version constitutes the most exact English translation of the lectures I am aware of.

point, Freud justly ascribed the discovery of the technique to his Swiss colleague Jung. In the second part of this speech, Freud went on to present his American audience with his theory of dream analysis that he considered “the *via regia* to the knowledge of the unconscious” (418, italics in original).

The fourth and fifth Clark lectures were the most controversial ones since they dealt with the subject of psychosexual development as well as the role of sexuality in society. According to the Viennese psychoanalyst, “the greatest significance must be attributed to erotic disturbances in the etiological factor of the illness” (Rosenzweig 425). In Freud’s thinking, the unleashed sexual urge of the child must be channelled through proper education so that the individual may become a healthy adult. The last lecture showed Freud as a proponent for social reform with regard to the treatment of sexuality in civilized society. To him, there were clearly two sides to this matter: on the one hand, he saw the necessity of “the exchange of the sexual goal for one that is more remote but socially more valuable” (437), a process that he termed “sublimation.” On the other hand, he cautioned his listeners against the practice of extremes and condemned the negation of the human instincts as required by civilized morality:

We ought not to aim so high that we completely neglect the original animality of our nature, nor must we forget that the happiness of the individual cannot be overlooked among the goals of civilization . . . Such an effort cannot succeed. (Rosenzweig 438)

Despite his earlier inhibitions against coming to the US, Freud was very happy with the way he was received by his American audience. This is evident through a telegraph he sent to Vienna on the evening of his last lecture, consisting of just one word: “successful” (List 78). In the aftermath of the Clark conference, the Austrian physician was invited by James J. Putnam to spend a few days at the latter’s camp in the Adirondacks. As Roazen shows, this brief sojourn marked the beginning of Putnam’s ardent support for Freud in the New World (729).

#### **CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM: PUTNAM’S ASSESSMENT OF FREUD**

In a letter dating from November of 1909, the American psychiatrist wrote to his Austrian colleague that he was able to obtain more insight than ever before



## The Influence of Sigmund Freud's Clark Lectures on American Concepts of the Self

into his patients' minds on account of the findings of psychoanalysis. Freud responded at once that "I found in you a high degree of general open-mindedness and unprejudiced perceptiveness to which I really am not accustomed in Europe" (Hale 210). In honor of his promise from the time of Freud's visit, Putnam subsequently published an extensive article explaining the basic principles of psychoanalysis to a general academic audience. Titled "Personal Impressions of Sigmund Freud and His Work, with Special Reference to His Recent Lectures at Clark University," this critical review appeared in two parts in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* under the editorial supervision of Putnam's colleague and friend Morton Prince.

The American psychiatrist dedicated the first part of his critique to the attempt of destroying contemporary prejudices against the theory of psychoanalysis. To this end, he started by identifying the roots of psychoneuroses as remnants from the afflicted individual's past and defended Freud's view of the unconscious as "the living supplement of our conscious and willed existences, the dwelling-place and working-place of emotions" (Putnam 298). Throughout the following pages, Putnam called for a tolerant approach towards the Freudian assessment of psychosexual development and provided his readership with plenty of details that supported the psychoanalytic outlook. The next passage contains a radical criticism of Puritan morality and the philosophy of Freud's opponents, who denounced his inner-directed method in support of the somatic style: "A fool's paradise is a poor paradise. If our spiritual life is good for anything, it can afford to see the truth" (307). As Nathan Hale points out, Freud himself was very pleased with Putnam's choice of words in this specific paragraph (211).

The second part of Putnam's writings is very interesting for today's reader because it imparts great insight into the way Victorian society reacted to psychoanalysis and its sexual theories. As we are told, "some able men" thought "that Freud mischievously introduces sexual notions into his patients' minds" (373). Putnam himself argued for a broader understanding of the term "sexuality" to include all sorts of human longings (375). He went on to expose the basic conflict of every human being in a truly psychoanalytic manner as "the working and the conflict of these two great influences, natural instinct and the repression of this instinct for the sake of society as a whole" (377). It is equally important to note that the American psychiatrist clearly recognized Freud's premise of the

proximity of normal cognitive processes to the workings of a disordered mind. Therefore, Putnam encouraged the suspension of any ethical assessment of the patient on the part of the treating physician (374). Altogether, the American physician took great care to emphasize his perception of the holistic nature of the Freudian approach in “that it brings at last a sense of freedom and of manhood” (306).

### **THE LASTING LEGACY OF FREUD’S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES**

When analyzing the first reverberations of Freud’s Clark lectures, one has to acknowledge the eighteenth annual meeting of the American Psychological Association on December 29, 1909. On this occasion, a whole session was devoted to the field of abnormal psychology and Freudian thought in particular; as Rosenzweig notes, diverging opinions concerning Freud’s psychosexual theories already became clear here (206-07). Another early echo of Freud’s coming to America was the founding of different institutions that were destined to promote his theory throughout the US—above all the American Psychoanalytic Association (1911) with James J. Putnam as its first president. On the whole, psychoanalysis started out as a fairly eccentric concept which took about twenty-five years to enter “the main stream of American psychology” (Sanford 51). Its first followers “thought of themselves as a younger generation ready to revolutionize neurology and psychiatry” (Hale 224). In a letter written to Vienna on September 24, 1923, six months prior to his death, Granville S. Hall expressed his perpetual admiration for his former guest: “Your work has been the chief inspiration of most that I have done for the last fifteen years. It has given me a totally new view of psychic life, and I owe to you more than to anyone else living or dead” (Rosenzweig 384).

The popularization of psychoanalysis in the United States went along with a distinct adaptation of its theory and practice to the American understanding of life. On the abstract side, the American Freudians placed a higher emphasis on the social rather than the individual aspects of the concept, thereby addressing “the collectivistic side of American national character” (Roazen 723). They also tended to advocate considerable sexual restraint (cloaked in an over-exaggeration of the theory of sublimation) and spuriously chose to ignore Freud’s appeal for a

## The Influence of Sigmund Freud's Clark Lectures on American Concepts of the Self

“limited hedonism” (Hale 342). In sum, the American approach to psychoanalysis adopted a much more positive outlook than the founder had held himself. As Roazen indicates, this is due in great part to the fact that Freud changed his perspective on the workings of the mind after he returned to Europe and henceforth viewed humanity in a significantly more predetermined and generally ill-fated way (726-28).

Contrary to this, American analysts firmly believed in the power of their therapeutic method to effect changes in their patients' lives. At the same time, they aimed for an applicable strategy that was “quicker, more efficient, less painful; if possible, something more elevating” (Sanford 50). They also stressed the relevance of the social surroundings on an individual's consciousness and claimed that “the more one believed in the significance of the environment, the more one could do to correct whatever condition the environment caused” (Hale 351). According to Sanford's assessment of Freud's impact on American psychology, two disciplines had been widely reformed through psychoanalytic theory by the mid-twentieth century; those were the fields of personality and clinical psychology (62). Not surprisingly, Sanford's essay notes that “least acceptable, or most controversial, has been the libido theory” (63).

Yet, Hale points to an important common denominator between the founder of psychoanalysis and his American followers when he reports that both held the same views “on the normative elements;” analysts in Europe and the United States called for “the reform of attitudes and customs concerning sexuality, the family, child raising, and the treatment of nervous and mental disorder” (333). In a similar vein, Sanford observes that Freud's evolutionary perspective “was calling attention to our common humanity” (59).

Perhaps one of the best examples of the lasting influence of Freudian theory in the US, Sanford's article sums up the possible future of the approach in a significantly optimistic—and therefore specifically American—tone. Almost fifty years after the psychoanalyst's memorable visit to Clark University, the American academic deemed it possible that

[w]e may yet realize what was one of Freud's fondest hopes; that psychoanalysis might be a benefit not only to the neurotic individual, but to larger groups of people, and eventually to society itself. (66)

Undeniably, Sigmund Freud's visit to the United States at the beginning of the last century transformed the prevalent view of the ego as it had heretofore been fostered by Victorian norms. In its wake, American society gained new insight into the workings of the human mind and psyche and eventually became free to behave in a less constrained and more natural way. Thus, the father of psychoanalysis directly challenged the prevailing lack of introspection in the New World and invested twentieth-century America with a genuinely new sense of self-awareness.

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