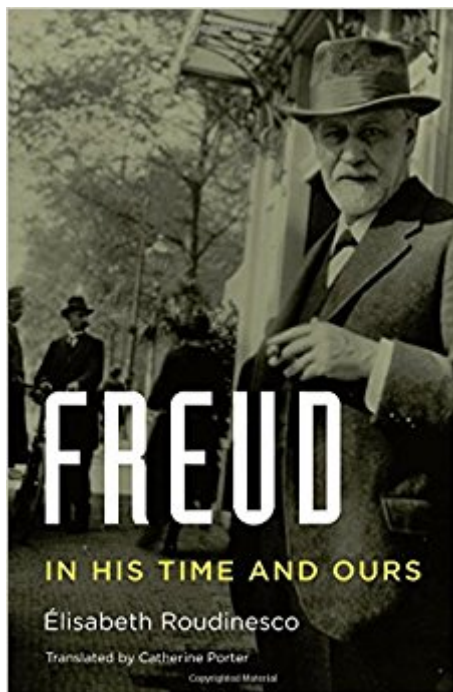


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# Freud: In His Time And Ours



## Synopsis

Isabell Hersh offers a bold and modern reinterpretation of the iconic founder of psychoanalysis. Based on new archival sources, this is Freud's biography for the twenty-first century—a critical appraisal, at once sympathetic and impartial, of a genius greatly admired and yet greatly misunderstood in his own time and in ours. Hersh traces Freud's life from his upbringing as the eldest of eight siblings in a prosperous Jewish-Austrian household to his final days in London, a refugee of the Nazis' annexation of his homeland. She recreates the milieu of fin de siècle Vienna in the waning days of the Habsburg Empire—an era of extraordinary artistic innovation, given luster by such luminaries as Gustav Klimt, Stefan Zweig, and Gustav Mahler. In the midst of it all, at the modest residence of Berggasse 19, Freud pursued his clinical investigation of nervous disorders, blazing a path into the unplumbed recesses of human consciousness and desire. Yet this revolutionary who was overthrowing cherished notions of human rationality and sexuality was, in his politics and personal habits, in many ways conservative, Hersh shows. In his chauvinistic attitudes toward women, and in his stubborn refusal to acknowledge the growing threat of Hitler until it was nearly too late, even the analytically-minded Freud had his blind spots. Alert to his intellectual complexity—the numerous tensions in his character and thought that remained unresolved—Hersh ultimately views Freud less as a scientific thinker than as the master interpreter of civilization and culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Do we think we know all there is to know about Freud? Not even close. *Áfâ* lisabeth Roudinesco's book is full of fresh facts about Freud's life and potent interpretation of his work. A sparkling and highly original intellectual biography. (Mark Edmundson, author of *The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days*) Through seamlessly and eloquently weaving together details from Freud's time and our own, [Roudinesco] provides a refreshingly new and welcome account of Freud's life and all. (Janet Sayers *Times Higher Education* 2016-11-10) [Roudinesco] provides an insightful, balanced, and sympathetic portrait of Freud. As she assesses Freud's revolutionary ideas about rationality, sexuality, and the unconscious, Roudinesco demonstrates that Freud was less a scientific thinker who uncovered universal truths than a product of his time: a genius, to be sure, but very much a bourgeois shaped by society, family, and politics in the late 19th century. Her critique has an especially persuasive force because it is grounded not only in an analysis of Freud's books, diaries, and letters but from accounts of his sessions with patients. (Glenn C. Altschuler *Psychology Today* 2016-11-03) What makes *Freud: In His Time And Ours* such a captivating read, is the author's ability to explain what are often complex, deeply-layered, and dark taboo subjects, into a language that is easily understood. [A] brilliant biography. (J. P. O'Malley *Irish Examiner* 2016-10-08) *Áfâ* lisabeth Roudinesco's new biography, *Freud: In His Time and Ours*, is a welcome reminder of Freud's considerable influence on 20th-century intellectual life. More important, she puts center stage Freud's complex brand of rationalism and the full scope of his achievements, which went far beyond offering a cure for individuals. In particular, Roudinesco captures Freud's recognition of the insurmountable ways in which our irrational desires and longings shape who we are and how we act. This correction is needed not only to give us a more accurate sense of Freud's innovations, but also to contrast it against today's more complacent assumptions about human rationality. Despite what economists and psychologists and political scientists insist, the rational self is not always master in its own house—whether in individual life or in collective experience. Roudinesco recounts Freud's life and the development of his thought with great flair. (Samuel Moyn *The Nation* 2016-11-02) Freud, a pioneer in creative biography, meets his analyst, a woman who illuminates modern psychology and social evolution for general audiences. This is perhaps the most important Freud biography since that of Jones, and a welcome corrective. (E. James Lieberman *Library Journal* (starred review) 2016-10-01) A new standard [A] masterful achievement. It has the tangible mix of insouciance,

scholarly thoroughness and psychoanalytic acumen, and it demonstrates Roudinesco's critical and philosophical talent. The book's strength is not so much in providing new material, although it does supply intriguing details about Freud's patients and his relationships with family, friends, opponents and disciples. Rather, Roudinesco offers us a rereading of Freud that makes sense of him in relation to his emergence in the Jewish Vienna of the second half of the 19th century, and to the Old Europe to which he was so attached until it crumbled in the 20th. (Stephen Frosh *Jewish Chronicle* 2016-11-25) [A] compelling biography | Forget the science: Roudinesco presents a brilliant cultural commentator, a man who married Romanticism and science in a way attractive to the belle époque. In fact, the biographer anchors Freud to his time and place in a way he himself never managed. (Brian Bethune Maclean's 2016-12-03) This is a book which eschews simple answers and is thus a significant milestone in our understanding of Freud | Roudinesco's work is both comprehensive and subtle | In reclaiming [Freud] as the master interpreter of civilization and culture, she has provided an invaluable service. (Stuart Kelly *Scotland on Sunday* 2016-12-04) A revealing portrait of a cultural revolutionary. (Bryce Christensen *Booklist* (starred review) 2016-11-01)

Isabell Roudinesco is Head of Research in History at the University of Paris Diderot (Paris 7).

Extremely dense and technical for the lay reader.

I think badly written/translated.

The subtitle of the book is "In his time and in ours" and the author devotes much space to setting Freud into his historical context (but says very little about him in our time). So there is, to give some examples, an account of antisemitism in Freud's Austria, of the interest that many medical men of the time had in sexology, of the attitudes of the period to women, and of other recent predecessors of his who had been interested in the interpretation of dreams or in free association. She also describes some of the ideas and incidents that have been attributed to Freud, both by followers including some in Ernest Jones's biography of Freud - and by opponents. Freud talked a lot about the influence of his childhood memories and made many references to what he thought were

characteristics of his personality, such as his need for a friend who was also an enemy. Roudinesco mostly accepts that what Freud said about himself is reliable, though it is not always clear to me when the analysis of his thinking is his own and when it is hers. Though a defender of Freud against misrepresentations of him, she is not a blind worshipper and is not shy in her judgments, frequently pointing out mistaken assessments and inconsistencies in his theories, his lack of interest in and understanding of the new cultural developments of his time (art, literature, film etc, even where these drew on his own ideas); and occasionally she accuses him of doctoring his own accounts of case-histories to make them conform to his doctrines. Because Freud had no understanding of mysticism and dismissed religion in *“The Future of an Illusion”*, she writes that this was “a bad book, and Freud knew it”. And several times she links Freud with the Romantic tradition rather than with the rational scientific one to which he claimed to belong. Feminism was making headway in Freud’s life-time; and feminist psychoanalysts challenged Freud’s view of female psychology as being too patriarchal and phallogocentric, and they rejected his concept of penis-envy which makes women see themselves as failed or deficient men. I found much of the chapter devoted to this topic too technical for my full understanding. Freud - for all his own inner turmoils which he himself describes, for all his psychological flaws (like authoritarianism) and for all his understanding of promiscuous behaviour, practised sexual abstinence even with his wife after the birth of the last of their six children (when he was 38) - led a respectable and scandal-free life, and was a devoted husband, father and grandfather. But among his disciples, to whom Roudinesco pays a lot of attention (as she does to Freud’s extensive and extended family), there were several who were so overtly neurotic and had such weird ideas that it is astonishing that they nevertheless seem to have been successful practitioners. Otto Gross, for example, is described on one page as “a brilliant psychiatrist” and on the next as “depraved” and “immoral”. And Jung’s lifestyle was hardly that of a sage! Roudinesco says that Freud treated more than 170 patients during his life time; an appendix lists 128 of them; and the biographies and treatments of several of these is discussed at considerable length in the book. Some of them were or became psychoanalysts themselves: in his later years Freud’s work was increasingly that of a training analyst. Freud identified himself as a Jew, albeit a secular one; he supported Jewish settlements in Palestine, but opposed to the idea of a Zionist state (on the practical grounds that it was unrealizable). He was politically conservative, strongly anti-communist, disliked dictatorship, but also had negative views of democracy. He was hostile to President

Wilson's insistence of national self-determination, quite anti-American and resentful of the fact that after the First World War the centre of psychoanalysis moved from Vienna and Berlin to England and the United States. Ernest Jones playing a particularly active part in fostering and shaping this development (and in playing down some of Freud's ideas which he thought would bring discredit in those countries to psychoanalysis). He initially took Nazi antisemitism as just one manifestation of the antisemitism he had encountered all his life, and it took him a long time to realize the eliminatory nature of its Nazi form. When Max Eitingon, the Jewish president of the Berlin Psychoanalytical Institute, was forced out in 1933, Freud (and Ernest Jones also) even supported the efforts of Eitingon's successor, the (non-Jewish) Felix Boehm, to collaborate with the Nazis, in the vain hope that this would enable psychoanalysis in Germany "to survive in unfavourable times". (The Nazi in charge of matters relating to psychotherapy was Matthias Göring, a cousin of Hermann Göring.) The scholarly apparatus at the end of the book is immense: the list of works cited by Roudinesco runs to 28 pages, with a further 12 pages listing articles in French. The source notes run to 81 pages. The book is said to shed new light on Freud. Though I have been interested in Freud all my life, I have not read widely enough to tell what is new in this book. The book has won two prestigious literary prizes in France, but that must be for its contents rather than for its literary qualities. I found it difficult to read: the style is ungainly (surely not the fault of Catherine Porter, the translator), and sometimes even obscure: there are passages where, even after having read them several times, I could not understand what Roudinesco is saying. I was puzzled by what appears to me the skewed balance in the book between major and relatively minor or even irrelevant material: a particularly glaring example of the latter is the paragraph she inserted between her account of Freud's death and that of his funeral. Roudinesco also takes for granted a good deal more technical knowledge than I possess. Her narration of some of Freud's famous cases – notably that of "the Wolfman" – read like a real gallimaufry, and the rival interpretations by other psychoanalysts of the material relating to the Wolfman would be comical had they not been taken so seriously by them and by Freud. (I suspect they are also taken seriously by Roudinesco.) Altogether, Freud's interpretations – not only of what his patients told him but also of literary, artistic and historical material – often strike me as fantastical, as he forces them into the straitjackets of his own *idées fixes*. He even postulated that the Jews killed their leader Moses and were ever afterwards afflicted by the guilt of the deed and made up for it by expecting his return as the Messiah. The theme of parricide, guilt and compensation runs through

much of Freud's thinking. If my enjoyment of the book were the criteria for the stars, I would give it just two; but that would not do justice to the research and knowledge in it: so four stars. Also, I (and the readers of this review) must bear in mind that Roudinesco is a professional and I am not.

That Freud's theories have fallen from scientific grace has long been shrugged off by pragmatic psychoanalysts, who pick and choose from whatever Freudian vocabulary on today's menu will boost business revenues the most. Free association: yes. Penis envy: ugh. Intersubjective transference: maybe. But unscientific though Freud was, he's immortal, says Roudinesco in this fawning biography. The master, she insists, is still disturbing Western consciousness, with his myths, his princely dynasties, his traversal of dreams, his stories of savage hordes, of Gradiva on the march, of the vulture found in Leonardo, of the murder of the father, and of Moses losing the tablets of the law (p. 427). I tell myself, adds Roudinesco, that, for a long time yet, he will remain the great thinker of his time and ours (ibid.). Is this claim of Freud's greatness warranted? Copernicus, to whom Freud compared himself, did not create a Secret Politburo to decide what was, or was not, to be allowed into science. The existence of Freud's Secret Politburo was not revealed until 1944—five years after the master died at age 83. Formed in 1913, the Secret Committee (so-called by its seven members) was at the doctrinal core of psychoanalysis. Its raison d'être was to legislate the correct use of Freudian vocabulary: Oedipal: yes. Pre-Oedipal: no. Castration fear: yes. Death anxiety: no. Roudinesco claims that in order to construct a rational project that could preserve the doctrine from all forms of deviance [the Politburo] had to reject obscurantist mythologies, spiritism, and magical thinking; hold firm on the question of sex; train clinicians who would no longer be afflicted with pathological disorders; struggle against charlatans (pp. 169-170). But psychoanalysis was nothing if not an obscurantist mythology magnified by the master's boyish enthusiasm for Oedipal spiritism and Lamarckian magical thinking. The Committee members, fibs Roudinesco, "enjoyed equality and shared sovereignty with the master, who could decide nothing without them" (ibid.). Should we believe that

Roudinesco doesn't know that Freud pulled all the strings of psychoanalysis, from beginning to end? No one ever shared sovereignty with the master, who indoctrinated even his own daughter, Anna, into Oedipal matters by putting her on the couch, late at night, in order, as Freud said, to awaken her libido (p. 244). In every patient, concedes Roudinesco, Freud found himself confronted with a reality that contradicted his theory (p. 247). Anna was no exception: she denied her lesbian tendencies in order not to contradict her father's Oedipal theory that women must be heterosexual to be normal. Anna learned from her analysis to hate her own homosexuality (p. 249). Did Freud ever listen to anything patients said that didn't fit his Oedipal preconceptions? Significantly, Roudinesco's account of Ferenczi and Rank omits the key facts. She asserts, falsely, that the Freudian clinic ... nullified therapeutic nihilism, which consisted in categorizing psychic illnesses without ever listening to the patient (p. 217). But it was Ferenczi and Rank, who, in the early 1920s, tried to save psychoanalysis from Freud's therapeutic nihilism. To Freud, psychoanalysis was a scientific method for researching the Oedipal unconscious and making a living: psychoanalysis as a therapy may be worthless, he confessed to Ferenczi (1932, p. 186). No one saw Freud's therapeutic nihilism more clearly than did Ferenczi and Rank, the two greatest theorists and clinicians on the Politburo. Tellingly, Roudinesco doesn't cite Ferenczi and Rank's judgment of Freud's emotional intelligence. In 1932 Freud groused to Ferenczi: "You don't credit me with more insight than a little boy. Just as Rank did back then [in 1924]" (Freud and Ferenczi, 2000, p. 444). Co-creators of modern short-term psychodynamic therapy, Ferenczi and Rank were keenly aware that Freud invented the Oedipal unconscious to defend against analyzing his ambivalent feelings toward his powerful mother, Amalia, who dominated him, from the day of his birth until the day she died, at 95, in 1930, when Freud was 75. Freud's greatest insight, says Roudinesco, was discovery of the Oedipus complex, an outcome of his daily self-analysis. What self-analysis? According to Ferenczi and Rank, the master was unwilling to see the powerful pre-Oedipal mother because, fused for a lifetime with Amalia, he had no more insight into his unconscious or anyone else's "than a little boy." As Rank told Freud in 1924, "I have the definite impression that you don't



wish to see certain things (Lieberman and Kramer, 2012, p. 209).

What's so great about that? Robert

Kramer robertkramer@gwu.edu REFERENCES Ferenczi, S. (1932). The Clinical Diary. Judith Dupont (Ed.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. Freud, S. and Ferenczi, S. (2000). The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, Vol 3: 1920-1933. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Lieberman, E. J. and Kramer, R. (2012). The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank: Inside Psychoanalysis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Robert Kramer is visiting professor of psychology at Loránd University, Budapest. He edited A Psychology of Difference: The American Lectures of Otto Rank (Princeton, 1996) and co-edited, with E. James Lieberman, The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank: Inside Psychoanalysis (Johns Hopkins, 2012).

This is the book one had better start this New Year with. If you don't like reading a voluminous book from cover to cover, then start with the second half of the work where the writer quotes what Thomas Mann and others have to say for Freud's time and ours.

Roudinesco does a fantastic job in her writing style and makes you want to keep reading. She dispenses some much need clarification about Freud. Of all biographies of Freud outside, as compared to Jones, I place hers in the top 5 biographies to read.

Brilliantly researched and written. I've never read a more thorough or interesting account of a very complex and fascinating innovator in the field and analysis and beyond.

Superbly researched and written. An authoritative account of Freud's life and work.

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