

# Literary Criticism and Theories

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DENG501



**L** OVELY  
**P** ROFESSIONAL  
**U** NIVERSITY

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# LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORIES

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### Literary Criticism and Theories

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5	<b>Jaques Lacan</b>
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## **Unit 1: Aristotle: The Poetics – Introduction to the Author and the Text**

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Objectives

Introduction

- 1.1 Life and Works of Aristotle
- 1.2 Aristotle's Poetics – An Introduction
- 1.3 "The Poetics": Its Universal Significance
- 1.4 Plato's Objection to Poetry
- 1.5 Aristotle's Views on Poetry
- 1.6 Summary
- 1.7 Key-Words
- 1.8 Review Questions
- 1.9 Further Readings

### **Objectives**

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Aristotle's Works and His Life.
- Understand Aristotle's Views on Poetry.

### **Introduction**

In this unit we shall try to know about Aristotle and his life and works and also understand about the relationship between Criticism and Creativity. We shall see how criticism is valued like creative writings. We shall know the role and place given to 'the critic' in the field of literary criticism.

In order to appreciate Aristotle's criticism of poetry and the fine arts it is essential to have some knowledge of literary criticism in antiquity prior to him, of the current critical theories and methods, and of the general, social and political conditions that prevailed in Greece at that time. It is also essential to have an idea of the views of Aristotle on ethics and morality in general.

The history of literary criticism has witnessed several critics who themselves had not been creative writers. Plato and Aristotle were such critics who gave guidelines of good literature without themselves being creative writers. Plato was the most distinguished disciple of Socrates. The 4th century BC to which he belonged was an age of inquiry and as such his chief interest was Philosophical investigations, which form the subject of his great works in form of Dialogues. He was not a professed critic of literature and his critical observations are not found in any single book. They lie scattered in seven of his dialogues, more particularly in *The Ion*, *The Symposium*, *The Republic* and *the Laws*. The first objection to his critical views came from his disciple, Aristotle.

### **1.1 Life and Works of Aristotle**

Aristotle was born of a well-to-do family in the Macedonian town of Stagira in 384 B.C. Hence the nickname *Stagirite* given to him by Pope. His father, Nicomachus, was a physician who died when Aristotle was young. In 367, when Aristotle was seventeen, his uncle, Proxenus, sent him to Athens to study at Plato's Academy. There he remained, first as a pupil, later as an associate, for the next twenty years.



Notes

### At Plato's Academy

At seventeen, in B.C. 368-67, Aristotle began the first phase of his career—a twenty years' residence in Athens as a member of Plato's Academy. When Plato died in 347, the Academy came under the control of his nephew Speusippus, who favored mathematical aspects of Platonism that Aristotle, who was more interested in biology, found uncongenial. Perhaps for this reason - but more likely because of growing anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens - Aristotle decided to leave. He accepted the invitation of Hermeias, his friend and a former fellow student in the Academy, to join his philosophical circle on the coast of Asia Minor in Assos, where Hermeias (a former slave) had become ruler. Aristotle remained there for three years. During this period he married Hermeias's niece, Pythias, with whom he had a daughter, also named Pythias.

In 345, Aristotle moved to Mytilene, on the nearby island of Lesbos, where he joined another former Academic, Theophrastus, who was a native of the island. Theophrastus, at first Aristotle's pupil and then his closest colleague, remained associated with him until Aristotle's death. While they were on Lesbos the biological research of Aristotle and Theophrastus flourished. In 343, Philip of Macedon invited Aristotle to his court to serve as tutor to his son Alexander, then thirteen years old. What instruction Aristotle gave to the young man who was to become Alexander the Great is not known, but it seems likely that Aristotle's own interest in politics increased during his stay at the Macedonian court. In 340 Alexander was appointed regent for his father and his studies with Aristotle ended.

The events of the next five years are uncertain. Perhaps Aristotle stayed at the court; perhaps he went back to Stagira. But in 335, after the death of Philip, he returned to Athens for his second long sojourn. Just outside the city he rented some buildings and established his own school, the Lyceum, where he lectured, wrote, and discussed philosophy with his pupils and associates. Under his direction, they carried out research on biological and other philosophical and scientific topics. Theophrastus worked on botany, Aristoxenus on music; Eudemus wrote a history of mathematics and astronomy, Meno of medicine, and Theophrastus of physics, cosmology, and psychology. In addition, Aristotle and his group produced a monumental account of the constitutions of 158 Greek city-states - an account Aristotle draws on in his own *Politics*.

### Tutor to Alexander

The second phase of his career may be said to begin when after three years in Lesbos, passed in the study of Biology, in B.C. 343-42.

But, despite the presence of philosophy, the court of Pella remained barbarous and sinister. To marry a new bride, Philip put away his Queen Olympias; in B.C. 336, she had him murdered, and her son Alexander came to the throne. After an absence of some twelve years, Aristotle returned to the quiet of Athens. Some twelve years more of life were left to him. This was the beginning of the third phase in his career.



*Did u know?* Aristotle was invited by King Philip to his capital of Pella, as tutor to Alexander, then only thirteen or fourteen; mainly, it seems, in political science and in literature. For Aristotle refused to follow the puritanical ban of his master, Plato, on poetry in education.

### Return to Athens: His School

No doubt Athenian patriots, like Demosthenes, may have knit their brows at the return of this alien, for he was the hereditary friend of that Macedonian monarchy which had crushed Greek freedom at Chaeronea (338); he was friend, too, of Antipater, made regent of Macedon while Alexander stormed through Asia; and foe to extreme democracy, as to all extremes. But Aristotle was a self-possessed character. On hearing that some one had abused him, "Let him even beat

me”, was his traditional reply, “provided I am not there.” At Athens, though broken, was still the intellectual capital of Greece, “the eye of Greece”. There Aristotle now founded his own school, the *Lyceum*, in a grove of Appollo, at Lyceus, south of Lycabettus, and not far from the present British School. Its buildings included a covered walk or walks, a museum, and a library. He would walk up and down the grove as he taught, and hence the term ‘peripetic’, used for his philosophy. More and more his mind seems to have turned to scientific study of concrete realities : as if he had taken to heart the old Chinese saying – “I spent a whole day meditating – I should have done better to learn; I stood on tiptoe for a good view – better had I climbed a hill.” And so research was now organised by him on an encyclopaedic scale – in politics, history, literature, natural science and biology. His fame spread. He became, what Dante calls him, “the Master of those who know”.

### Last Years and Death

But his last years were not unshadowed. His wife had died; Alexander, though he had sent his old tutor biological data from his conquests, deteriorated with success, saw fit to become a god, ignored Aristotle’s advice to treat his Greek subjects on a higher footing than Orientals, and put to death Aristotle’s nephew, the tactless Callisthenes. Lastly, when Alexander himself expired at Babylon, Athens leapt to arms against the Macedonians; and, as part of the campaign, Aristotle was accused of impiety, largely for the praises lavished in his poem, years ago, on his dead father-in-law Hermeias. To save the Athenians, as he put it, “from sinning against philosophy a second time,” the old philosopher withdrew of Chalcis in Euboea, where he died next year (B.C. 322), aged sixty-three.

### His Will

We still have the will in which he provided with careful considerateness for his family and slaves, in particular for his mistress Herpyllis and his son by her; with his own ashes were to be laid, as she had wished, those of his dead wife Pythias. In this will he provided for the deliverance of his slaves : “*It is the first emancipation proclamation in history*”.

### His Views on God

A brief review of Aristotle’s views on God, on the state and the government, and on morality and ethics, is essential for a proper understanding of his theory of poetry and the fine arts as developed in *The Poetics*. We, therefore, give here the salient features of his views on these subjects.

In the philosophical system of Aristotle, God is not the Creator of the universe but the Cause of its motion. For a creator is a dreamer, and a dreamer is a dissatisfied personality, a soul that yearns for something that is not, an unhappy being who seeks for happiness – in short, an imperfect creature who aims at perfection. But God is perfect and since he is perfect he cannot be dissatisfied or unhappy. He is, therefore, not the Maker but the Mover of the universe. He is the unmoved mover of the universe.

Every other source of motion in the world, whether it be a person or a thing or a thought, is (according to Aristotle) a moved mover. Thus the plough moves the earth, the hand moves the plough, the brain moves the hand, the desire for food moves the brain, the instinct for life moves the desire for food and so on. In other words, the cause of every motion is the result of some other motion. The master, of every slave is the slave of some other master. Even the tyrant is the slave of his ambition. But God is the result of no action. He is the slave of no master. He is the source of all action, the master of all masters, the instigator of all thought and movement.

Furthermore, God is not interested in the world, though the world is interested in God. For to be interested in the world means to be subject to emotion, to be swayed by prayers or by criticism, to be capable of changing one’s mind as a result of somebody else’s actions or desires or thoughts – in short, to be imperfect. But God is passionless, changeless, perfect. He moves the world as a beloved object moves the lover.

The Aristotelian God, who is loved by all men, but who is indifferent to their fate, is a cold, impersonal and, from our modern religious standpoint, “perfectly” unsatisfactory type of Supreme Being. He resembles the Primal Energy of the scientists rather than the Heavenly Father of the poets.



Notes

### **On Government**

When Aristotle moves down from heaven to earth his thought becomes more logical, more understandable, more concrete. One by one he takes up the various forms of government that have been tried out in the world—dictatorship, monarchy, oligarchy, (the rule of the few) and democracy. He analyzes each of them in turn, admits their strong features and points out their weaknesses. Of all the forms of government, dictatorship is the worst. For it subordinates the interests of all to the ambition of one. The most desirable form of government, on the other hand, is that which, “enables every man, whoever he is, to exercise his best abilities and to live his days most pleasantly.” Such a government, whatever its name, will always be a constitutional government. Any government without a constitution is a tyranny, whether it is the government of one man, of a few men, or of many men. The unrestrained will of a handful of aristocrats or of a horde of common men is just as great a tyranny as the unrestrained will of one man. The dictatorship of a class is no better than the dictatorship of an individual.

### **Dislike of Communism**

In the first place, the government should not be—like Plato’s Republic—communitic. The common ownership of property, and especially of women and of children, would result in continual misunderstandings, quarrels and crimes. Communism would destroy personal responsibility. “What everybody owns, nobody cares for.” Common liability means individual negligence. “Everybody is inclined to evade a duty which he expects another to fulfil.” You can no more hope to communize human goods than you can hope to communize human character. Aristotle advocates the individual development of each man’s character and the private ownership of each man’s property.

### **Public Welfare**

But just as each man’s personal character must be directed to the public welfare, so, too, must each man’s private property be employed for the public use. “And the special business of the legislator is to create in all men this co-operative disposition.” It is the legislator’s entire business to provide for public interests of the citizens. To this end there should be no hard-and-fast distinction between classes, particularly between the class of the rulers and the class of the ruled. Indeed, all the citizens alike should take their turn of governing and being governed, with the general proviso that, “the old are more fitted to rule, the young to obey”.

### **Education**

The ruling class must be vitally concerned with the education of the young. And this education must be both practical and ideal. It must not only provide the adolescent citizens with the means for making a living, but it must also teach them how to live within their means. In this way, the state will be assured of an enlightened, prosperous, co-operative and contented body of citizens.

### **Democracy**

Above all, the rulers must aim at the contentment of the ruled. They should achieve contentment through justice. It is only in this way that they can avoid revolutions. “No sensible man, if he can escape from it or overthrow it, will endure an unjust government.” Such a government is like a fire that heats the pent-up resentment of the people to the bursting point. It is bound, sooner or later, to result in a violent explosion. Judged from the standpoint of fairness toward its citizens, “democracy appears to be safer and less liable to revolution than any other form of Government.” The countries that are most likely to explode into early rebellion are those that are governed by dictators. “Dictatorships” observes Aristotle, “are the most fragile of governments.”

### **Happiness: Conditions for Its Attainment**

The aim of government, writes Aristotle, is to ensure the welfare of the governed. And thus politics translated into ethics. The state exists for man, and not man for the state. Man is born for only one purpose—to be happy. But what is happiness? It is that pleasant state of mind which is

brought about by the habitual doing of good deeds. But to be happy it is not sufficient merely to be good. It is necessary also to be blessed with a sufficiency of goods—that is, good birth, good looks, good fortune and good friends. Above all, a long and healthy life is necessary for the attainment of happiness. “One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day.” To make a perfect summer of our life we need many days, a sufficiency of sunlight and full measure of song.

### ‘Virtue’ Essential for Happiness

Yet even in a short life, and in the midst of misfortune, it is possible for the noble man to be happy. For the noble soul can cultivate an insensibility to pain, and this in itself is a blessing. In other words, we may sometimes attain happiness by renouncing it. Furthermore, no man can be called unhappy if he acts in accordance with virtue. For such a man, “will never do anything harmful or mean”. And happiness, as we have already observed, consists in the doing of good deeds. “But the only completely happy man is he who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with wealth and health and friendship, not for some chance period, but throughout a complete life.”

### The Greek Conception of Virtue

Happiness is the result of virtue, and ‘Virtue’ is a wide term. To the Greeks this word did not mean, as it does to us, moral excellence alone. It meant any kind of excellence. Thus a Greek Casanova might have been called a virtuous lover because he was an efficient lover. A ruthless but competent. General would in Athens have been regarded as a virtuous soldier. A virtuous person, in Aristotle’s philosophy, was a person who possessed physical powers, technical competence and mental virtuosity. To these three qualities Aristotle now added a fourth requisite for happiness—moral nobility.



Notes

In *the Poetics*, the word ‘Good’ is used in this sense. This all-round excellence, therefore, was needed for Aristotle’s, “happy warrior”, in the battlefield of life.

### The Golden Mean

Aristotle summarized this manifold excellence in his famous doctrine of the, “golden mean”. The happy man, the virtuous man, is he who preserves the golden mean between the two extremes. He is the man who steers the middle course between the shoals that threaten on either side to wreck his happiness. In every act, in every thought, in every emotion, a man may be overdoing his duty or underdoing it or doing it just right. Thus, in sharing his goods with other people, a man may be extravagant, which is overdoing it, or stingy, which is underdoing it, or liberal, which is doing it just right. In the matter of facing the dangers of life, a man may be rash or cowardly or brave. In the handling of his appetites, he may be gluttonous or abstemious or moderate. In every case, the rational way of life is to do nothing too much or too little but to adopt the middle course. The virtuous man will be neither supernormal nor subnormal, but justly and wisely normal. In *The Rhetoric*, he tells us that the virtuous man will act, “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and the right way.” In short, he will at all times and under all conditions observe the golden mean. For the golden mean is the royal road to happiness. This view is relevant to an understanding of Aristotle’s theory of “Catharsis”.

### The Ideal Man

Aristotle then goes on to describe the ideal man who is most worthy of being happy. This ideal man, the Aristotelian gentleman, “does not expose himself unnecessarily to danger, but is willing in great crises to give his life, if necessary. He takes joy in doing favours to other men, but he feels shame in having favours done to him by other men. “For it is a mark of superiority to confer a kindness, by inferiority to receive it.” His unselfishness, however, is but a higher form of selfishness,

## Notes

an enlightened selfishness. The doing of a kind deed is not an act of self-sacrifice but of self-preservation. For a man is not an individual self but a social self. Moreover, every good deed is a profitable investment. It is bound, sooner or later, to be returned with interest. "The ideal man, therefore, is altruistic because he is wise.....He never feels malice and always forgets injuries.....In short, he is a good friend to others, because he is his own best friend."

**His Works**

The more important works of Aristotle are :

- |  |                                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1. 158 <i>Constitutions</i> (including the <i>Constitutions of Athens</i> ). | 2. <i>Dialogues</i> .           |
| 3. <i>On Monarchy</i> .  | 4. <i>Alexander</i> .           |
| 5. <i>The Custom of Barbarians</i> .   | 6. <i>Natural History</i> .     |
| 7. <i>Organon, or The Instrument of Correct Thinking</i> .                   | 8. <i>On the Soul</i> .         |
| 9. <i>Rhetoric</i> .   | 10. <i>Logic</i> .              |
| 11. <i>Educational Ethics</i> .  | 12. <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> . |
| 13. <i>Physics</i> .   | 14. <i>Metaphysics</i> .        |
| 15. <i>Politics</i> .  | 16. <i>Poetics</i> .            |

Aristotle wrote about four hundred volumes in all. These volumes covered practically every phase of human knowledge and human activity. But many of them have been lost. Thus it is supposed that he wrote a dialogue on *The Poet*, and that *The Poetics* had a second part. But these works have not come down to us.

**1.2 Aristotle's Poetics – An Introduction**

*The Poetics* must have been penned by Aristotle after he settled as teacher and investigator in Athens about 335 B.C., and before he left Athens in 324 B.C. It is a short treatise of twenty-six chapters and forty-five pages, neither exhaustive and comprehensive, nor yet a coherent study of the subject with which it deals. It does not seem to be a work intended for publication. It does not say much about Comedy, touches rather briefly on the epic, and the renowned concept of 'Catharsis' has not been fully developed or explained. It is a lopsided work, concerned mainly with Greek philosopher's theory of tragedy.

**Its Six Parts**

It is divisible into the following six parts :

1. Chapters I–V contain introductory remarks on poetry, and its classification into different kinds, including tragedy and comedy. Imitation is said to be the basic principle common to all arts.
2. The next fourteen chapters VI–XIX are devoted to Tragedy, a definition is given, and its formative elements are discussed.
3. The next three chapters XX–XXII are devoted to a discussion of poetic diction.
4. Chapter XXIII deals with Narrative Poetry and Tragedy.
5. The epic is treated in brief and compared with tragedy in Chapters XXIV and XXVI.
6. Chapter XXV examines the objections of critics against poetry. The objections are also answered.

**Its Plan**

Commenting on the scheme and plan of *the Poetics*, **Abercrombie** writes that the subject matter of *the Poetics*, as the book has come down to us, is not merely restricted to Greek literature, but to certain kinds of Greek literature. These are four in number ; and Aristotle groups them in pairs, according to their historical and aesthetic connections. He supposes poetry to begin in two kinds,

as the originating motive of all poetry tended, by its very nature, to diverge in two directions. Poetry begins either as heroic or as satiric poetry : but out of heroic (or epic) poetry develops tragedy, out of satiric comes comedy. Since then, the nature of poetry thus disposes itself into two pairs or kinds, the principles valid for epic will, with the proper modification, be valid also for tragedy, those applicable to satire will be similarly applicable to comedy. But Aristotle regarded the historically later kind in each pair as a higher development of poetic art, and as, therefore, requiring fuller discussion than the earlier kind. Accordingly, his scheme is to work out the theory of the later development and then apply it to the earlier kind. But *the Poetics*, as we have it, is not complete. The scheme of the discussion is unmistakably indicated ; but actually we are only given the discussion of tragedy, and the application of its results to epic poetry. There can be no doubt that the original treatise contained a second part, now lost, in which comedy and satire were similarly treated.

### Its Defects

The work is in the nature of class notes of an intelligent teacher and has certain obvious defects :

1. The handling of the subject is disproportionate.
2. *Lyric poetry has been practically ignored*, probably because (a) it was thought to constitute an elementary stage in poetic development, (b) it was supposed to belong to the domain of music, and not poetry proper, and (c) it was assimilated in the drama.
3. Most probably it is also for this last reason that *descriptive poetry—poetry of nature—has also been ignored*.
4. *Comedy and Epic have been slightly and cursorily treated*.
5. *The large part of the discussion is devoted to tragedy*, but here, too, the attention has been focused on the nature of the plot, and the effects of tragedy. Tragedy was regarded in the age as the form in which all earlier poetry culminated and this accounts for the excessive importance which Aristotle attaches to it. In this respect, as in many others, Aristotle was displaying contemporary influences and limitations.
6. *The style is telegraphic and highly concentrated*, a style for the initiated, i.e. for those who were already familiar with the author's terminology and thought. Commenting on the style of *the Poetics*, **Abercrombie** writes, "It is abrupt, disjointed, awkwardly terse, as awkwardly digressive; essential ideas are left unexplained ; inessential things are elaborated. In short, it has all the defects of lecture notes." *The Poetics* is not self-explanatory and self-sufficient. It must constantly be interpreted by the other works of the Greek philosopher, more specially, his *Ethics*, *Politics*, and the lost dialogue on *the Poet*.
7. *It is a work obviously not meant for publication*. There is irregularities and anomalies, constant digressions, omissions, contradictions, repetitions, showing haste and lack of revision.
8. *Often there are signs of hesitation and uncertainty in the use of terminology*.
9. *Aristotle's theories are not wholly the result of free and dispassionate reflection.* His views are conditioned by contemporary social and literary influences. They are based on earlier theories', and are also conditioned by the fact that he had to confute certain theories current at the time. The main trend of his argument is determined by Plato's attack upon poetry. Aristotle takes up the challenge of Plato at the end of *Republic X*, and proceeds to establish the superiority of poetry over philosophy, and its educational value. *Much of it is in the nature of special pleading on behalf of poetry, and so has all the defects of such an advocacy*.
10. *"Even to accomplished scholars the meaning is often obscure."* This difficulty is further increased by the fact that the average reader is not familiar with the Greek language, its idiom, syntax and Grammar. Many of the Greek words do not admit of literal translation into English, and even scholars have gone astray. There is a wide gulf between Greek and English usage, and hence the wide divergence among the numerous English translations of *the Poetics*. Interpretations differ from critic to critic, to the great confusion and bewilderment of the student.

Notes

11. Aristotle's theories are based exclusively on Greek poetry and drama with which he was familiar. Many of his views have grown outdated and unfit for universal application.

### Its Many Merits: A Great World Book

Despite these defects, *the Poetics* is an epoch-making work, a work which is a storehouse of literary theories, one of the great, "world-books", a book whose influence has been continuous and universal. Some of the more important reasons of its greatness are :

1. Aristotle discards the earlier, 'oracular' method, in which critical pronouncements were supposed to be the result of some prophetic insight. He also discards Plato's dialectic method (use of dialogue) as inadequate for arriving at a positive and coherent statement of truth.
2. The Greek Philosopher starts from concrete facts, i.e. existing Greek poetry, and through analysis of facts arrives at his principles and generalisations for which, like a scientist, he claims no finality. His methods are exploratory and tentative. It is an attempt to arrive at the truth, rather than an assertion of some preconceived notions. As Gilbert Murray points out, "it is a first attempt made by a man of astounding genius to build up in the region of creative art a rational order, like that he had already established in the region of the physical sciences."
3. Throughout, he studies poetry in relation to man. He traces it back to the fundamental instincts of human nature, i.e. the instinct of limitation and the instinct of harmony. Thus his method of inquiry is psychological. It is the first psychological study of the poetic process. Tragedy he justifies by its emotional effects.
4. In 'The Poetics', Aristotle also originates the historical method of inquiry. He notes different phases in the evolution of Greek poetry, and thus his work becomes a starting point for subsequent literary histories. He was the first to apply such methods to literary problems.
5. Though Aristotle never claimed any finality, for his principles, yet, says Atkins, "the miracle of 'the Poetics' is that it contains so much that is of permanent and universal interest. And this is so because the literature on which it was based was no artificial product of a sophisticated society, but the natural expression of a race guided solely by what was elemental in human nature."
6. The work is full of ideas that are as true today as they were when it was written, though there are mingled with them certain other ideas which are limited in their application, misleading or even definitely wrong.
7. Aristotle's greatness lies in the fact that he raised the essential problems, though he was not always successful in providing solutions. 'The Poetics' is thought-provoking ; it is a great irritant to thought. Aristotle asks the right type of questions, and literary theory has grown and advanced by seeking answers to Aristotle's questions.

### 1.3 "The Poetics": Its Universal Significance

Despite its obvious shortcomings, *the Poetics* is an important landmark in the history of literary criticism. It is the most significant thing for the study of literature that has come down to us from Greek civilization. First of all, it represents the final judgment of the Greeks themselves upon two, and perhaps the leading two, Hellenic inventions : Epic Poetry and Tragic Drama. Though ample evidence is wanting as to the existence of other strictly scientific investigations into the nature of poetry, before Aristotle or contemporary with him, we may assume that here, as elsewhere in the field of knowledge, he is far from being an isolated scholar ; but he systematizes and completes the work of his predecessors, with an eye to the best thought and practice of his own time – and yet, unquestionably, with great independence of judgment.

The brief treatise is important, secondly, because directly or indirectly, it has commanded more attention than any other book of literary criticism, so that the course of literary history after it is not intelligible without an acquaintance with *the Poetics*, at first hand whether in the original or through a translation.



But further, the work has a permanent value, quite apart from historical considerations. Aristotle's fundamental assumptions, and the generalizations upon which he mainly insists, are as true of any modern literature as they are of his own. That a work of art, for instance,—a drama, or the like—may be compared to a living organism, every part of whose structure is essential for the function of the whole, is a conception having validity for all ages. And the same may also be said of his contention that poetry has its own standard of correctness or fitness, and is to be judged primarily by its own laws.

*The Poetics* is further valuable for its method and perspective. Simply and directly it lays emphasis upon what is of first importance : upon the vital structure of a poem rather than the metre ; upon the end and aim of tragedy, in its effect, upon emotions rather than on the history of the Chorus. Profound thoughts are expressed in language suited to a scientific inquiry. Starting with the Platonic assumption that a literary form, an oration, for example, or a tragedy, has the nature of a living organism, Aristotle advances to the position, that each distinct kind of literature must have a definite and characteristic activity or function, and that this specific function must be equivalent to the effect which the form produces upon a competent observer; that is, form and function being, as it were, interchangeable terms, the organism is what it does to the person who is capable of judging what it does or ought to do. Then further, beginning again with the general literary estimates that had become more or less crystallized during the interval between the age of the Attic drama and his own time, and that enabled him to assign tentative values to one play and another, the great critic found a way to select, out of a large extent, literature, a small number of tragedies which must necessarily conform more nearly than the rest to ideal type. As in his *Politics*, which is based upon researches among a great number of municipal constitutions, yet with emphasis upon a few, so in *the Poetics* his conclusions regarding tragedy depend upon a collection of instances as exhaustive as he could make it without loss of perspective; that is. his observation was inclusive so that he might not pass over what since the days of Bacon we have been accustomed to think of as, 'crucial instances'. By a penetrating security of these crucial instances in tragedy, he still more narrowly defined what ought to be the proper effect of this kind of literature upon the ideal spectator, namely, the effect which he terms the catharsis of pity and fear, the purgation of the two disturbing emotions. Then, reasoning from function back to form, and from form again to function, he would test each select tragedy, and every part of it, by the way in which the part and the whole conduced to this emotional relief. In this manner, he arrived at the conception of an ideal structure for tragedy, a pattern which, though never fully realised in any existing Greek drama, must yet constitute the standard for all of its kind.

Finally, *the Poetics*, if it be sympathetically studied, may be thought to have a special value at the present time, when a school has arisen, led by Professor Croce, whose notion seems to be that there really are no types in art, and hence no standards of interpretation and criticism, save the aim of the individual writer or painter. In his essay *Of Education* Milton alludes to some 'antidote' in one part of literature to an evil tendency in another. Whenever *the Poetics* of Aristotle receives the attention it demands, it serves as an antidote to anarchy in criticism.

## **1.4 Plato's Objection to Poetry**

Admirers of Plato are usually lovers of literary art. It is so because Plato wrote dramatic dialogues rather than didactic volumes and did so with rare literary skill. You would expect such a philosopher to place a high value on literary art, but Plato actually attacked it, along with other forms of what he called mimesis. According to Plato's theory of mimesis (imitation) the arts deal with illusion and they are imitation of an imitation. Thus, they are twice removed from reality. As a moralist, Plato disapproves of poetry because it is immoral, as a philosopher he disapproves of it because it is based in falsehood. He is of the view that philosophy is better than poetry because philosopher deals with idea / truth, whereas poet deals with what appears to him / illusion. He believed that truth of philosophy was more important than the pleasure of poetry. He argued that most of it should be banned from the ideal society that he described in the Republic.



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### 1.4.1 What were His Objections?

Plato objected to poetry on three grounds, viz., Education, Philosophical and moral view point.

Plato's objection to Poetry from the point of view of Education:

1. **In 'The Republic' Book II:** He condemns poetry as fostering evil habits and vices in children. Homer's epics were part of studies. Heroes of epics were not examples of sound or ideal morality. They were lusty, cunning, and cruel - war mongers. Even Gods were no better.
2. **Plato writes:** "if we mean our future guardians to regard the habit of quarreling among themselves as of all things the basest, no word should be said to them of the wars in the heaven, or of the plots and fighting of the gods against one another, for they are not true.... If they would only believe as we would tell them that quarreling is unholy, and that never up to this time has there been any quarreling between citizens..... these tales (of epics) must not be admitted into our State, whether they are supposed to have allegorical meaning or not."

Thus he objected on the ground that poetry does not cultivate good habits among children.

#### Objection from Philosophical Point of View

1. In 'The Republic' Book X: Poetry does not lead to, but drives us away from the realization of the ultimate reality - the Truth.
2. Philosophy is better than poetry because Philosophy deals with idea and poetry is twice removed from original idea.
3. Plato says: "The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearance only .... The imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring.

#### Objection from the Moral Point of View

1. In the same book in 'The Republic': Soul of man has higher principles of reason (which is the essence of its being) as well as lower constituted of baser impulses and emotions. Whatever encourages and strengthens the rational principle is good, and emotional is bad.
2. Poetry waters and nourishes the baser impulses of men - emotional, sentimental and sorrowful. Plato says: "Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily limited .... And therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered state, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthen the feelings and impairs the reason ... Poetry feeds and waters the passion instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue."

### 1.4.2 Why he Objected to Poetry?

These are Plato's principal charges on poetry and objection to it. Before we pass on any judgement, we should not forget to keep in view the time in which he lived. During his time:

- There was political instability
- Education was in sorry state. Homer was part of studies - and Homer's epics were misrepresented and misinterpreted.
- Women were regarded inferior human beings - slavery was wide spread.
- Best time of Greek literature was over - corruption and degeneration in literature.
- Confusion prevailed in all sphere of life - intellect, moral, political and education.

Thus, in Plato's time the poets added fuel to the fire. He looked at poets as breeders of falsehood and poetry as mother of lies. And so the chief reasons for his objecting poets were:

- it is not ethical because it promotes undesirable passions,
- it is not philosophical because it does not provide true knowledge, and

- it is not pragmatic because it is inferior to the practical arts and therefore has no educational value.

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These were the reasons for Plato's objections to poetry.

### 1.4.3 What is his Theory of Mimesis?

In his theory of mimesis, Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. He believed that 'idea' is ultimate reality. Art imitates idea and so it is imitation of reality. He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair. The idea of 'chair' first came in the mind of carpenter. He gave physical shape to his idea and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, painter's chair is twice removed from reality. Hence, he believed that art is twice removed from reality. He gives first importance to philosophy as philosophy deals with idea. Whereas poetry deals with illusion - things which are twice removed from reality. So to Plato, philosophy is better than poetry. This view of mimesis is pretty deflationary, for it implies that mimetic art – drama, fiction, representational painting – does not itself have an important role to play in increasing our understanding of human beings and the human world. This implication would not be rejected by every lover – or indeed every creator – of imaginative literature. Ironically it was Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, who was the first theorist to defend literature and poetry in his writing *Poetics* against Plato's objection and his theory of mimesis.

## 1.5 Aristotle's Views on Poetry

Plato confused the study of 'aesthetics' with the study of 'morals'. Aristotle removed that confusion and created the study of aesthetics.

Plato was a great poet, a mystic and a philosopher. Aristotle - the most distinguished disciple of Plato was a critic, scholar, logician and practical philosopher. The master was an inspired genius every way greater than the disciple except in logic, analysis and common sense. He is known for his critical treatise: (i) *The Poetics* and (ii) *The Rhetoric*, dealing with art of poetry and art of speaking, resp.

For centuries during Roman age in Europe and after renaissance, Aristotle was honoured as a law-giver and legislator. Even today his critical theories remain largely relevant, and for this he certainly deserves our admiration and esteem. But he was never a law-giver in literature and is no longer held as such in our times. *The Poetics* is not merely commentary or judgement on the poetic art. Its conclusion is firmly rooted in the Greek literature and is actually illustrated from it. He was a codifier; he derived and discussed the principles of literature as manifest in the plays and poetry existing in his own day. His main concern appears to be tragedy, which in his day was considered to be the most developed form of poetry. Another part of poetics deals with comedy, but it is unfortunately lost. In his observations on the nature and function of poetry, he has replied the charges of Plato against poetry, where in he partly agrees and partly disagrees with his teacher.

### 1.5.1 How did Aristotle Reply to Plato's Objection?

Aristotle replied to the charges made by his Guru Plato against Poetry in particular and art in general. He replied to them one by one in defense of poetry.

Plato says that art being the imitation of the actual is removed from truth. It only gives the likeness of a thing in concrete, and the likeness is always less than real. But Plato fails to understand that art also give something more which is absent in the actual. The artist does not simply reflect the real in the manner of a mirror. Art is not slavish imitation of reality. Literature is not the photographic reproduction of life in all its totality. It is the representation of selected events and characters necessary in a coherent action for the realization of artist's purpose. He even exalts, idealizes and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. These elements, present in art, are absent in the raw and rough real. R.A.Scott-James rightly observes: "But though he (Poet) creates something less than that reality, he also creates something more. He puts an idea into it. He put his perception into it. He gives us his intuition of certain distinctive

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and essential qualities." This 'more', this intuition and perception is the aim of the artist. Artistic creation cannot be fairly criticized on the ground that it is not the creation in concrete terms of things and beings. Thus considered it does not take us away from the Truth, but leads us to the essential reality of life.

Plato again says that art is bad because it does not inspire virtue, does not teach morality. But is teaching the function of the art? Is it the aim of the artist? The function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express emotions and represent life. It should ever be confused with the function of ethics which is simply to teach morality. If an artist succeeds in pleasing us in aesthetic sense, he is a good artist. If he fails in doing so, he is a bad artist. There is no other criterion to judge his worth. R.A.Scott-James observes: "Morality teaches. Art does not attempt to teach. It merely asserts it is thus or thus that life is perceived to be. That is my bit of reality, says the artist. Take it or leave it - draw any lessons you like from it - that is my account of things as they are - if it has any value to you as evidence or teaching, use it, but that is not my business: I have given you my rendering, my account, my vision, my dream, my illusion - call it what you will. If there is any lesson in it, it is yours to draw, not mine to preach." Similarly, Plato's charge that needless lamentations and ecstasies at the imaginary events of sorrow and happiness encourages weaker part of soul and numbs faculty of reason. This charge is defended by Aristotle in his Theory of Catharsis. David Daiches summarizes Aristotle's views in reply to Plato's charges in brief: "Tragedy (Art) gives new knowledge, yields aesthetic satisfaction and produces a better state of mind."

Plato judges poetry now from the educational standpoint, now from the philosophical one and then from the ethical one. But he does not care to consider it from its own unique standpoint. He does not define its aims. He forgets that every thing should be judged in terms of its own aims and objective its own criteria of merit and demerit. We cannot fairly maintain that music is bad because it does not paint, or that painting is bad because it does not sing. Similarly, we cannot say that poetry is bad because it does not teach philosophy of ethics. If poetry, philosophy and ethics had identical function, how could they be different subjects? To denounce poetry because it is not philosophy or ideal is clearly absurd.

### **1.5.2 How did Aristotle Differ in His Theory of Mimesis from His Guru Plato?**

Aristotle agrees with Plato in calling the poet an imitator and creative art, imitation. He imitates one of the three objects - things as they were/are, things as they are said/thought to be or things as they ought to be. In other words, he imitates what is past or present, what is commonly believed and what is ideal. Aristotle believes that there is natural pleasure in imitation which is in-born instinct in men. It is this pleasure in imitation that enables the child to learn his earliest lessons in speech and conduct from those around him, because there is a pleasure in doing so. In a grown up child - a poet, there is another instinct, helping him to make him a poet - the instinct for harmony and rhythm.

He does not agree with his teacher in - 'poet's imitation is twice removed from reality and hence unreal/illusion of truth. To prove his point he compares poetry with history. The poet and the historian differ not by their medium, but the true difference is that the historian relates 'what has happened?', the poet, what may/ought to have happened?- the ideal. Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and a higher thing than the history, which expresses the particular, while poetry tends to express the universal. Therefore, the picture of poetry pleases all and at all times.

Aristotle does not agree with Plato in function of poetry to make people weaker and emotional/too sentimental. For him, catharsis is ennobling and humbles human being.

So far as moral nature of poetry is concerned, Aristotle believed that the end of poetry is to please; however, teaching may be given. Such pleasing is superior to the other pleasure because it teaches civic morality. So all good literature gives pleasure, which is not divorced from moral lessons.

**Self-Assessment**

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**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) The relationship between criticism and creativity is as illusive as ..... .  
 (a) Tree and fruit                      (b) Hen and egg                      (c) Art and life
- (ii) The critic of ..... is given independent place and it differs from all other kind of criticism.  
 (a) Architecture                      (b) Gardening                      (c) Art and literature
- (iii) The renowned Elizabethan playwright Ben Jonson is of the view that:  
 (a) Judge of poets is only the faculty of poets; and not of all poets, but the best.  
 (b) Not every critic is born a genius, but every genius is born a critic of art. He has within himself the evidence of all rules.  
 (c) Both from Heaven derive their light; These born to judge, as well as those to write.
- (iv) True criticism may be defined as:  
 (a) The corruption of a poet is the generation of a critic.  
 (b) The art of judging the merits and demerits of creative composition.  
 (c) The art of finding faults in creative composition.
- (v) No critic can ever be a good critic unless:  
 (a) He possesses the artist's vision and has capability of artistic sensibility  
 (b) He vehemently lashes at the work of art.  
 (c) He glorifies the work of art.

**1.6 Summary**

“The book is of permanent value as a mere intellectual achievement ; as a store of information about Greek literature ; and as an original or first-hand statement of what we may call the classical view of artistic criticism. It does not regard poetry as a matter of unanalysed inspiration : it makes no concession to personal whims or fashion or ennui. It tries by rational methods to find out what is good in art and what makes it good, accepting the belief that there is just as truly a good way, and many bad ways in poetry, as in morals or in playing billiards. This is no place to try to sum up its main conclusions. But it is characteristic of the classical view that Aristotle lays his greatest stress, first on the need for Unity in a work of art, the need that each part should subserve the whole, while irrelevancies, however brilliant in themselves should be cast away ; and. next, on the demand that great art must have for its subject the great way of living. These judgments have often been misunderstood, but the truth in them is profound and goes near to the heart of things. In short, *‘the Poetics’* is not only the first thoroughly philosophical discussion of literature; but the foundation of all subsequent discussions.

**1.7 Key-Words**

1. Komos : A festive procession with all kinds of ritual exuberance.
2. Maenads : Feminine worshippers of the cult of Dionysus, who gathered in the woods outside the city and did not allow any man to participate in the rituals.
3. Phallika : A ritual song-dance held during the rural festivals of Dionysus celebrating the male organ.

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**1.8 Review Questions**

1. Write a short note on the life of Aristotle.
2. Discuss Aristotle's views on God.
3. What is the Greek conception of virtue?
4. What are the Plato's Objection to Poetry?
5. Discuss the theory of mimesis.

**Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (b)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (a)                      (iv) (b)                      (v) (a)

**1.9 Further Readings**



Books

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## Unit 2: Aristotle: The Poetics: Introduction, Tragedy

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy.
- Understand the text 'The Poetics'.

### Introduction

The Poetics must have been penned by Aristotle after he settled as teacher and investigator in Athens about 335 B.C., and before he left Athens in 324 B.C. It is a short treatise of twenty-six chapters and forty-five pages, neither exhaustive and comprehensive, nor yet a coherent study of the subject with which it deals. It does not seem to be a work intended for publication. It does not say much about Comedy, touches rather briefly on the epic, and the renewed concept of Catharsis has not been fully developed or explained. It is a lopsided work, concerned mainly with Greek philosopher's theory of tragedy.

The word tragedy can be applied to a genre of literature. It can mean 'any serious and dignified drama that describes a conflict between the hero (protagonist) and a superior force (destiny, chance, society, god) and reaches a sorrowful conclusion that arouses pity or fear in the audience.' From this genre comes the concept of tragedy, an idea based on the possibility that a person may be destroyed precisely because of the attempt to be good. (Irony, therefore, is essential and it is not surprising that dramatic irony, which can so neatly emphasize irony, is common in tragedies.)

Tragedy implies a conflict between human goodness and reality. Many scholars feel that if God rewards goodness either on earth or in heaven there can be no tragedy. If in the end each person gets what he or she deserves, tragedy is impossible. Tragedy assumes that this universe is rotten or askew. Christians believe that God is good and just, hence, for certain scholars tragedy is logically impossible. Of course a possible variation of the tragic concept would allow a character to have a fault which leads to consequences far more dire than he deserves. But tragic literature is not intended to make people sad. It may arouse pity and fear for the suffering protagonist, or for all humanity, especially ourselves. But usually it also is intended to inspire admiration for the central character, and by analogy for all mankind.

Aristotle's *The Poetics* is a lop-sided work. Most of it is devoted to the consideration of Tragedy in all its aspects and constituent parts, and the Epic and the Comedy are treated only cursorily. Chapters VI-XXII, seventeen chapters out of twenty-six, are devoted exclusively to a discussion of



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tragedy, and these chapters form the main body of the whole work. Chapters I-V contain an introductory "discussion of Tragedy, Epic and Comedy, and Chapter IV gives a summary history of the origin and development of Tragedy and Comedy, Chapter V gives a brief comparison between Tragedy and Epic which is later elaborated in Chapter XXVI. Chapter XX-XXII deal with the style and diction of poetry in general, and so also of tragedy. Only one chapter each is devoted exclusively to Comedy, and Epic. Thus, it becomes clear that *The Poetics* is concerned chiefly with Tragedy, which is regarded as the highest poetic form. "But the theory of Tragedy is worked out", says **Abercrombie**, *with such insight and comprehension, that it becomes the type of the theory of literature.*"

## 2.1 Concept of Tragedy

### **The Greek Conception of Tragedy**

Before we proceed to consider Aristotle's conception of Tragedy, a word of caution is necessary; it must be constantly borne in mind that the Greek conception of tragedy was different from the modern conception. Today, we regard Tragedy as a story with an unhappy ending. But this was not Greek conception. *In the Greek language, the word 'tragedy' means "a goat song"*, and the word came to be used for plays because of the practice of awarding goats to winners in a dramatic contest. On the days of their dramatic festivals, four plays were performed on each of the days, three generally serious in tone, and one satyr-play (or burlesque). *For the Greeks, Tragedy simply meant, "one of the three serious plays presented before the satyr-play at a dramatic festival."* Greek tragedies were serious in tone, but many of them had happy endings. The Greek conception of tragedy should be kept in mind, for Aristotle did to consider tragedy from the modern point of view. That is why two out of the four possible tragic plots, mentioned in Chapter XIII, move from, "misery to happiness". It should also be borne in mind that Aristotle was not familiar with modern drama, and his views are based entirely on the Greek drama which alone he knew.

### **Tragedy Differentiated from other Poetic-forms**

Aristotle begins by pointing out that imitation is the common basis of all the fine Arts, which, however, differ from each other in their medium of imitation, their objects of imitation, and their manner of imitation. Thus poetry differs from painting and music in its medium of imitation. Poetry itself is divisible into epic and dramatic on the basis of its manner of imitation. The Epic narrates, while the Dramatic represents through action. The Dramatic poetry itself is distinguished as Tragic or Comic on the basis of its objects of imitation. Tragedy imitates men as better, and comedy as worse, than they really are. In this way, does Aristotle establish the unique nature of Tragedy and differentiate it from the other kinds of poetry.

### **Tragedy: Its Origin: Its Superiority over the Epic**

Next, Aristotle proceeds to trace the origin and development of poetry. In the beginning, poetry was of two kinds. There were 'Iambs' or 'invectives', on the one hand, and hymns on the gods or panegyrics on the great, on the other. The first, 'Iambs', or, 'invectives' developed into satiric poetry, and the hymns and panegyrics into Epic, or Heroic poetry. Out of Heroic poetry, developed Tragedy, and out of Satiric came the Comedy. As Tragedy is a later development, it is therefore, a higher kind than the Epic. In Chapter XXVI of *The Poetics*, the Greek philosopher compares Tragedy with Epic in a number of respects and demonstrates this superiority. Both Epic and Tragedy imitate serious subjects in a grand kind of verse, but they differ in as much as Epic'' imitates only in one kind of verse, and Tragedy uses different kinds of verse for its choral odes and its dialogue. The Epic is more lengthy and so more comprehensive and varied, but the Tragedy has much greater concentration and so is more effective. Besides this, the Tragedy has all the elements which The Epic has, while there are certain elements of Tragedy which the Epic does not have. The Epic lacks music and spectacle which are important constituents of Tragedy, and which enhance its effect. It has also reality of presentation and of which the Epic lacks. The Tragedy is superior, because, "All the parts of an epic are included in Tragedy; but those of Tragedy are not all of them to be found in the Epic."

## 2.2 Chapter-wise Critical Summary of 'The Poetics'

### Ch I: Imitation, the Common Principle of All Arts: Medium of Imitation

Aristotle is fully alive to the essential unity of all the arts. In his opinion, Imitation is the common principle of all the fine arts. Poetry, comedy, tragedy, dancing, music, flute-playing, painting, sculpture etc., are all modes of imitation. Since Aristotle includes music in the imitative arts, it becomes clear that his conception of imitation is higher than that of Plato. Imitation for Aristotle is not a mere 'mimicry' or servile copying of nature, but a truly creative activity. The musician imitates not the superficial appearances of external nature, but he imitates imaginatively the emotions and passions of the human soul. Thus Aristotle extends the scope of imitation to include the inner life of man.

Though imitation is the common principle of the fine arts, the various arts differ from each other in three ways: They differ in their *medium* of imitation, in their *objects* of imitation, or in the *manner* of their imitation. It should be noticed that in order to make the sense clear the word 'imitation' must also be read with 'means' and 'objects'. The relevant sentence should read,

"..... either by a difference of kind in their means (of imitation) or by differences in the objects (of imitation), or in the manner of their imitation."

By 'means of imitation', are meant the medium, the vehicle or the material, through which the artist imitates. Colour, form, and sound are the various mediums which Aristotle lists. Sound is further divided into language, rhythm and harmony or melody. For example, the medium of the painter is 'colour', and that of the poet is language and rhythm. For poetry, whether lyric or epic, tragedy, comedy, flute-playing, etc., the common medium of imitation is rhythm, language and harmony (melody), which may be used singly or in different combinations. The use of language differentiates poetry from music which use only rhythm and harmony.

It should also be noted that in Aristotle's times there was no name for literature as such. Hence he calls it an, "art without a name". He is also aware that poetry may be written without metre, that even an imitation in prose can be poetic.

### Ch II: The Objects of Imitation: Tragedy and Comedy

The arts (fine arts) are distinguished from each other first by their medium of imitation, and secondly by the objects they imitate. In general, he says, the objects of poetic imitation are men in action. Poetry does not imitate men as such, but, "men doing or experiencing something". These men whose actions and experiences are the objects of poetic imitation may be either better (higher) or worse (lower), or the same as they are in actual life. "The third variant Aristotle merely mentions, and then ignores; he is wholly concerned with the other two." Since poetry imitates men as better or worse than they actually are, it means that poetic imitation is no mere mimicry or servile copy; it is an act of creative imagination which may represent men as heroic or exaggerate their follies and weaknesses. A poet may idealise or he may caricature (present men in a ludicrous light). And this is the difference between tragedy and comedy. Tragedy idealises—imitates men as better (or higher)— and comedy caricatures, i.e., shows men as worse (or lower) than they actually are. Poetry concerned with possibilities—with what ought to be—and not with photographic realism.

### Ch III: The Manner of Imitation: Epic and Tragedy

The arts are further distinguished from each other by their manner of imitation. There may be three modes or ways of imitation: (1) the poet may use the narrative method throughout, (2) he may use the dramatic method, i.e., describe things through assumed characters or show things actually being done, or (3) he may use a combination of these two methods. He may narrate a part of his story, and represent part of it through a dialogue between assumed characters. On the basis of the manner of imitation, poetry is classified as epic or narrative, and dramatic. In dramatic poetry, the dramatic personages act the story, in epic poetry a poet like Homer narrates the story, as well as tells it through a dialogue between assumed characters. He uses both the narrative and the dramatic method; Tragedy only the dramatic.

## Notes

To sum up: Aristotle classifies the fine arts on the basis of (1) their medium of imitation, (2) their objects of imitation, and (3) their manner of imitation. Poetry is distinguished from the other arts on the basis of its medium of imitation. Further, poetry is divisible into epic and dramatic, according to the manner of its imitation. Dramatic poetry is then classified into tragedy and comedy on the basis of its medium of imitation.

The first three chapters of *the Poetics* bring out Aristotle's passion for 'categories' or 'classification'.

### Ch IV: Origin and Development of Poetry

Having classified the fine arts in the first three chapters, Aristotle now traces the origin and development of poetry, by which he means dramatic poetry, and it is to this genre that he now increasingly confines his attention.

In his opinion, poetry had its origin in four human instincts:

1. the natural human instinct to imitate things, as we observe in the case of monkeys and children.
2. the natural pleasure we get from a good work of imitation. It is for this reason that accurate imitations of even ugly objects give pleasure,
3. learning or knowing, something new, is always a pleasure; it is for this reason that we derive pleasure from an imitation of an object we have never seen before, and
4. our instinctive pleasure in harmony and rhythm.

Poetry grew out of these natural causes. Quite early in its development, poetry diverged into two directions. Poets who were more serious imitated noble actions of noble personages, and in this way were composed panegyrics on the great and hymns to the gods. Out of those grew heroic or epic poetry, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. Out of the epic, by gradual stages, rose the tragedy.

Similarly, there were poets of a frivolous nature who imitated the actions of trivial persons, and in this way they produced invectives or personal satires, and comedy derives from these 'Iambus' or personal satires.

Aristotle notes the peculiar position of Homer who excels both in the serious and the frivolous. Just as he is the greatest poet in the serious style, so, he is the greatest poet in the field of the comic and in light. His *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are serious epics, while his *Margites* is a comic epic, in which he is the first to give us a picture of the ridiculous which is the essence of comedy. (*The Margites*, however, has been lost; it has not come down to us.)

### Ch V: Definition of the Ridiculous: Epic and Tragedy

In this chapter, Aristotle first discusses the subject matter of comedy and then proceeds to compare and contrast epic and tragedy.

Comedy is a representation, of characters of a lower type, worse than the average. By 'lower' or 'worse' Aristotle does not mean morally 'bad', but only ridiculous. *He then defines the ridiculous, "as a species of the ugly"*. It is that species of the ugly which does not cause any pain or harm to others. Rather, it is productive of laughter.

Epic and tragedy are similar in as much as both of them represent 'serious' actions of 'serious' characters, or characters 'better' than the average. They do so in a grand or elevated style. However, the differences between the two forms are several and well marked:

1. Epic is narrative, while tragedy is dramatic in form;
2. Epic uses only one metre, "the heroic", while tragedy can use different metres in different parts, (verse for dialogue and song for the choric parts); and
3. the Epic is much longer, because its action is not limited by time or place, while the action of tragedy is confined to, "a single circuit of the sun". It was this statement from which were derived the unities of time and place by later critics.

However, it should be noted that Aristotle here does not lay down any rule and he adds the clauses, "as far as possible", and "or something near that". Aristotle is here not laying any rigid

rules, but only making a statement of general practice. He is fully aware of the fact that in the beginning the tragedy, like the epic, had no fixed limit of time.

In the end, Aristotle asserts the superiority of the epic over the tragedy. All the elements of an epic are found in tragedy, but all the elements of tragedy are not found in the epic. Thus 'spectacle' and 'melody' are parts of tragedy, but they are not the parts of epic.

## Ch VI: Definition of Tragedy; Its Formative Parts

This chapter is the core of *the Poetics*. In his famous definition of tragedy, Aristotle summarises what has been said already and devotes almost all the following chapters to explaining it further. Having shown that the arts differ from one another in the objects 'imitated', in the medium employed, and in the mode or manner of imitation. Aristotle now shows

1. that the 'object imitated' by tragedy is an action or piece of life of serious interest, complete in itself and having magnitude, i.e. long enough to direct the change in the fortunes of the tragic hero and serious enough to be more than trivial;
2. that the medium employed is language embellished by all the available decorations, such as melody and poetic diction; and
3. that the manner of imitation is dramatic, i.e. the story is told not by narration but by essential characters acting it out. This representation excites in the auditors pity and fear, and by providing an outlet for these and similar emotions produces a sense of pleasurable relief (catharsis).

It should be noted that Plato, who was more emotional than Aristotle, held that the effect of art on human nature might be a dangerous excitement of emotions which ought, in the interest of public morality, to be discouraged. Aristotle, realizing the risks of inhibition or repression replies that this effect is not only pleasurable but also beneficial. Tragedy is a sort of nervous specific which provides a 'catharsis' we might say, 'a good clearance' of emotions which might otherwise break out inconveniently. It saves us from psychological distress by providing an emotional outlet.

A passage in Plato may help to explain this view: 'When babies are restless, you don't prescribe quiet for them; you sing to them and rock them to and fro.' In such cases, the external agitation, getting the better of the internal agitation, produces peace and calm. The babies go to sleep. That agrees with Aristotle's view. The excitement of tragedy provides for our feeling a pleasurable relief. A 'good cry' acts as an emotional aperient (or purgative). We feel all the better for it and leave the theatre, 'in peace of mind, all passion spent'.

Tragedy is next analysed into six formative parts. Of these, three are concerned with the objects imitated,

1. *a plot*, or piece of life (human actions or experiences);
2. *the characters* of the *dramatis personae*;
3. *the Thoughts* which they express (intellectual qualities). Two of the elements, 'diction' and 'melody' or song, are the means of imitation employed. The sixth 'spectacle', is the mode of imitation by which the story is presented on a stage before an audience.

Of these constituent parts Aristotle regards the Plot as by far the most important—'the life and soul tragedy'. No amount of psychological ingenuity in drawing character, no degree of poetic or theatrical brilliance, can make a successful tragedy, because tragedy is in essence a story. In the same way, you can have no picture without some sort of shape or design. Through the whole of *the Poetics* runs this insistence on the primary importance of plot, which is the main subject of discussion—with one brief digression—up to the end of Chapter XVIII.

Many of the terms used by Aristotle in this chapter have been the subject of hot controversy among critics. For example, words like 'serious', 'magnitude', 'Katharsis', etc., have been differently interpreted by different critics. Similarly, his view of the comparative significance of 'Plots' and 'character' has also excited much discussion.

It should also be noted that 'thought', in the sense of the Greek word which Aristotle has used for it, means all that is expressed by the use of words. Indeed, a knowledge of Greek language and usage is unavoidable for precise understanding of *the Poetics*.

## Ch VII: Plot-Construction

Having given his definition of tragedy, and the six formal parts of a tragedy, Aristotle now proceeds to examine in detail the construction of an ideal plot, which he considers of the first importance in tragedy. First of all he explains what he means by the tragic action being a 'whole'. A *whole* is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning or the exposition is causally connected with what follows, but it has nothing antecedent to it. It is not consequent upon anything else. This does not mean that the tragic story must begin from the very beginning. Rather, the tragic action is more effective if it begins late in the career of the hero. What Aristotle means is that the beginning must be self-explanatory. It must not provoke us to ask 'why' and 'how'; no knowledge of antecedent circumstances should be necessary for its understanding. The middle must follow naturally and inevitably upon the beginning, and must logically lead to 'the end' or catastrophe. Thus the artistic wholeness means that there is a link-up of the various incidents, each following the other naturally and inevitably.

Aristotle then discusses the question of '*magnitude*', i.e. the proper length of a tragic play. It must be a whole story, not a collection of incidents. And if that whole is to be beautiful, it must belong enough to allow us to appreciate the orderly arrangement of the parts, i.e. the development from an incident, which may reasonably be detached from its antecedent causes and taken as a 'beginning', through the intermediate stages to an end that is inevitable or at any rate probable. On the other hand, it must not be so long that the beginning is forgotten before the end is reached. Similarly, according to this view, an animal so minute that the proportion of parts to the whole cannot be distinguished is not beautiful, except under a microscope. Nor would an animal a thousand miles long be beautiful, because we can get no impression of it as a whole. Beauty consists in a proper relation between the whole and its parts. Provided that a play is thus well-proportioned' and can be readily comprehended as a whole, then the larger the better. In any case it must be long enough to allow room for the sequence of events by which the hero falls "from happiness into misfortune.

Aristotle's comparison of the plot of a tragedy to a living creature is significant. As a matter of fact, he conceives of tragedy in organic terms, and speaks of its 'organic' wholeness and 'organic' unity. Artistic beauty requires that the relation of the parts to the whole must be symmetrical and proportionate, as in a living organism.

## Ch VIII: Unity of the Plot

In this chapter, Aristotle makes two significant statements. First, that the formal unity cannot be imparted to the plot merely by the story of a single hero's life. Infinitely varied things may happen to the hero, the dramatist must make a proper selection out of these numerous incidents and not introduce all of them. Just as in the other arts, the artist imitates only one object, so also the dramatist must imitate only one action.

Secondly, the unity of plot must be an organic one. Just as in a living organism every part is essential for the life of the organism and cannot be removed without injury to it, in the same way there should be nothing superfluous in the tragic action. There should be no action which can be transposed or removed without damaging the whole.

It is only such organic unity of action which Aristotle considers essential; he has not much to say about the so-called unities of Time and Place which were derived from him by later critics.

## Ch IX: The Nature of Poetic Truth: Poetry and History

Poetry does not aim at photographic realism. It is the function of a poet to relate not what has actually happened, but what may possibly happen according to the law of probability and necessity. By 'probability and necessity' he means the principle of natural causation. The events described should be such as are possible in real life, and they should follow each other logically and inevitably. What tragedy imitates is not life, but some conception of life, some possibility of life seized by the poet's mind. Poetry is an imitation of the poet's idea of life, and from this arises its universality. Poetry is more philosophical than History, because by giving an idealised and ordered imitation of life, the poet is in a better position to generalise the law of things, and make us understand



them, and such understanding is the very essence of philosophy. A Historian recounts actual events chronologically without showing the chain of cause and effect. History, in this sense, merely tells us what did happen; tragedy shows us what could, or, indeed, must happen. The poet, whether in epic or in drama, shows us what persons of a certain type inevitably or probably do and say and suffer. The truth he tells is of universal application, even though he is telling the story of events which actually happened to real people, for even so he is the 'maker' of the story, because he so selects the incidents as to show how and why they occurred. It is this inevitable sequence of cause and effect which arouses the emotions proper to tragedy. A mere accident does not arouse so much fear and pity as a disaster which we see to be inevitable in the sequence of events.

There is thus in the nature of tragic art no reason why the poet should not invent both names and incidents. "The reason why this was so seldom done in Greek tragedy is to be found in its religious origin. Its original object was to retell the old sagas in a new form and with new meaning." It was this which limited the choice of plots to tradition, history and mythology. Aristotle, however makes no allusion to this historical fact. Tragedians, he says, need not rigidly and in detail adhere to the traditional stories, but are well advised to keep the historic, or traditional names, for their representation, because that helps 'to give artistic, verisimilitude and credibility'. "What has happened is manifestly possible, else it would not have come to pass."

The Greek word for, 'poet' means a 'maker', and a poet is a maker not because he makes verses, but because he makes his plots. Even when he takes his subject from history and tradition, he subjects it to artistic ordering and selection, and so still remains the maker of his plot. *The plot is thus distinguished from the story; the story may be traditional and borrowed, but the poet always makes his own plots.* The plot lies not in the incidents, but in the arrangement of incidents. Aristotle condemns 'episodic' plots. An episodic plot is one which has events and incidents without any probable or necessary connection, and which can, therefore, be removed without causing any injury to the plot.

### Ch X: Kinds of Plots: Simple and Complex

Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of plots, simple and complex. Here 'Simple' and 'Complex' are technical terms. In a simple plot the action moves forward continuously and uniformly, without any change of direction, towards the catastrophe. In a complex plot, there is an abrupt change of direction. The hero's fortunes rise upto a certain point, the climax, and then fall rapidly downwards. There are reversals (*peripeteia*) and recognitions or discoveries (*anagnorisis*). Peripety and anagnorisis are incidents and as such they are connected with the plot, and have nothing to do with character. The exact significance of these terms is explained and defined in Chapter XI.

### Ch XI: Peripety, Anagnorisis and Suffering

The plot of a Tragedy has three formative elements—*Peripety*, *Anagnorisis* (or Discovery or Recognition) and *Suffering*. In a complex plot there is a climax or turning-point at which some sort of discovery leads directly to the change of fortune, and this change of fortune, Aristotle calls the 'peripety', a sudden reversal of fortune's wheel. The most effective form of peripety is one that is exactly coincident with anagnorisis, i.e. the discovery of some fact as in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where Oedipus's fortune is reversed at the point where he discovers his parentage.

'Peripety' can also be interpreted to mean the reversal of the agent's intention, i.e., a situation in which the consequence of the hero's action is the opposite of what he intended. This boomerang device is certainly effective and full of tragic irony. It is present in the peripety of *the Oedipus*. Duncan's murder in *Macbeth* is another example, since the results were not what Macbeth intended. *In this sense, Peripety becomes a kind of tragic irony forming the very basis of the plot.*

Discovery and peripety, as thus explained, are constituent elements of the most effective kind of tragedy. A third element of tragedy, is 'suffering', i.e. the depiction of tragic incident or calamity, as murder, torture, mimicry, wounding, etc.



## Notes

**Ch XII: Quantitative Parts of Tragedy**

The quantitative sections of tragedy are matters of Greek theatrical convention, just as it is conventional to divide modern dramas into Acts and scenes. Scholars have generally regarded the chapter as interpolation, because it has little originality and is not connected in any way with the main theme of *the Poetics*. Rather, it comes in the way of the smooth flow of thought from Chapter XI to Chapter XIII. The quantitative sections of the tragedy listed by Aristotle are:

- |                    |                                    |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Prologue</i> | 2. <i>Episode</i>                  |
| 3. <i>Exode</i>    | 4. <i>Choric Song divided into</i> |
| (i) <i>Parode</i>  | (ii) <i>Stasimon</i> , and         |
|                    | (iii) <i>Commos</i> .              |

1. *The Prologue* is the entire part which precedes the *Parode* of the Chorus.
2. *The Parode* is the entrance song of the Chorus.
3. *The Episode* is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs. *Episode* is the equivalent of an Act in our Drama.
4. *The Stasimon* is a Choric ode.
5. *The Commos* is a joint lamentation of the Chorus and the actors together.
6. *The Exode* is the entire part of the tragedy after the last song of the Chorus.

**Ch XIII: The Structure of a Perfect Tragedy – Ideal Tragic Hero**

In the very beginning of the chapter, Aristotle expresses his preference for complex plots, which he has already defined in Chapter XI. In his view, the distinctive tragic emotions are pity and fear, and so the plot must be such as is likely to arouse these emotions.

It follows from this that three kinds of plots are to be avoided.

1. A perfectly good man must not be shown passing from happiness to misery, for such an action will be disgusting and odious. It will not arouse the emotions of pity and fear.
2. A bad man, passing from misery to happiness is also not suitable for tragedy. Obviously such a situation is not at all tragic.
3. An extremely bad man falling from happiness into misery is equally unfit. His fall is well deserved, and pity and fear are aroused by the undeserved suffering of one, like us. An extremely bad man is not, 'like us', for human nature is a mingled yarn of good and bad.

There can also be a fourth situation in which a good man passes from misery to happiness, but Aristotle makes no mention of it.

Having ruled out utter villains and men pre-eminently just and good as heroes proper to tragedy. Aristotle proceeds to lay down the qualification of an ideal hero. In the first place, he must be a person of an intermediate kind, neither an utter villain nor a man perfectly good and just. On the whole, he should be a good man but with ordinary human weaknesses and frailties. In this way, he would be like us and our pity and fear would be aroused by his misfortunes. His misfortunes must not be wholly undeserved, they must result from his own actions. Here Aristotle uses the word *Hamartia*, and this word has given rise to much hair-splitting among scholars. The consensus of opinion is that it means an, "error of judgment" or, "miscalculation" rather than any moral weakness or depravity. Secondly, the ideal tragic hero must be a person who enjoys prosperity, name and fame. He must be a person highly placed in society, for the fall of such a person is more likely to excite the tragic emotions than the fall of a person not so eminently placed. He must belong to some great family, as was the convention of the Greek tragedy.

An ideal plot must have a single issue—it must depict the misfortunes of the hero. Aristotle puts in the second rank a tragedy with a double issue, i.e. happiness for the good and misery for the bad. The pleasure in such a case is not a pleasure proper to tragedy. Rather it is proper to comedy. Aristotle thus rules out *tragi-comedies*, dramas which have double plots – a tragic or serious main plot, and a comic sub-plot.

## Ch XIV: Comparative Study of Spectacle and Plot as Sources of Tragic Emotions

Notes

Pity and fear may be aroused by the mere sight of disaster, what Aristotle calls 'the Spectacle', e.g. Oedipus with his eyes torn out. But the true, 'proper pleasure' of tragedy, is independent of 'spectacle' and is felt even when the play is read without performance, because it is produced by the structure and sequence of the incidents. The most effective situation, Aristotle concludes, is where one member of a family murders—or does irreparable harm to another member. This may be done in ignorance and the kinship be discovered afterwards. More effective still is it if the kinship is discovered just in time to avert the doing of the deed. *This rather inconsistently allows the fullest tragic effect to a play with a happy ending, which theorists of modern tragedy would not admit.* But the conditions of the Greek stage could not provide a 'quick curtain'. The characters and the chorus had to achieve their exit with dignity and beauty. This necessitated some relaxation of tension after the act of murder or other disaster, and for that reason a happy ending of this sort was more appropriate than it would be on the modern stage. We may also note as evidence in support of Aristotle that a sudden escape at the eleventh hour serves powerfully to stimulate the relief of tears.

In Chapters X and XI Aristotle distinguished three parts of the plot, *Peripety, Discovery and Suffering*. The two former were fully discussed in Chapter XI. The present chapter explains the meaning of Suffering i.e. the kind of disaster or misfortune which is peculiarly suited to produce, 'the proper pleasure of tragedy, which is the release of such emotions as pity and fear'.

It should be noted that Aristotle lists four types of sufferings or actions resulting in misfortune or disaster proper to tragedy. "These four types of tragic actions are derived from the inter-relation of two major factors—a tragic deed that is a part of plot and a lack of knowledge, that is, at least in some degree, a part of Character"—(O.B. Hardison). Lack of knowledge is, 'hamartia', and knowledge is 'anagnorisis'. Disaster which arouses the emotions of pity and fear, often results from 'hamartia' or lack of knowledge, and it may be prevented if, 'anagnorisis' or knowledge comes in time.

## Ch XV: Character and Its Essentials

This chapter deals with characterisation in a tragedy. Aristotle lists four essentials of successful characterisation:

1. *The characters must be good.* A character is good, if his words and actions reveal that his purpose is good. In ancient Greece women were considered as inferior beings and slaves as worthless. But Aristotle says that when introduced in a tragedy even women and slaves must be shown to have some good in them. Entirely wicked characters, even when assigned minor roles are unfit for tragedy. Wickedness or depravity is to be introduced, only when absolutely necessary for the plot. Aristotle is against wanton introduction of wickedness. Just as a successful painter makes his portrait be sacrificed like more beautiful than the original and still retains the likeness to the original, in the same way the poet must represent his characters better and more dignified and must still preserve the likeness to the original.

2. *The characters must be appropriate,* that is to say they must be true to 'type' or 'status'. For example, a woman must be shown as womanly and not 'manly', a slave must be given a character which is appropriate to his "status". Manliness would not be appropriate in a woman, and dignity and nobility in a slave.

If the characters are taken from some known myth or story, say the story of King Oedipus, then they must be true to tradition. They must behave as King Oedipus is traditionally supposed to have behaved.

3. The third essential of successful characterisation is that *characters must be true to life*, i.e. they must have the virtues and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, love and hatreds of average humanity. Such likeness is essential, for we can feel pity only for one who is like ourselves, and only his misfortunes can make us fear for ourselves.

Notes

4. Fourthly, *the characters must be consistent*. They must be true to their own natures, and their actions must be in character. Thus a rash, impulsive person should act rashly and impulsively throughout. If the dramatist has to represent an inconsistent person, then he must be, “consistently inconsistent”.

Aristotle emphasises the point, further by saying that *the actions of a character must be necessary and probable outcome of his nature*. He should act as we may logically expect a man of his nature to act under the given circumstances. Just as the incidents must be casually connected with each other so also his actions must be the natural and probable consequences, of his character, and the situation in which he is placed. They must be logically inter-linked with his earlier actions, and must not contradict the impression produced earlier.

This leads Aristotle to digress on the weakness of *denouements* which are not the natural or necessary outcome of the preceding events, but are arbitrarily achieved by the intervention of the super-natural or by other such mechanical devices. He permits the use of such stage-devices only for past events and for future events which must be foretold. The actual action of the tragedy should have nothing irrational or improbable about it; the use of the irrational or the supernatural should be strictly limited to events lying outside the tragedy.

### Ch. XVI: Recognition: Its Kinds

In chapter XI, Aristotle has already defined and explained *Anagnorisis*, ‘Discovery’ or ‘Recognition’ as change from ignorance to knowledge bringing about a reversal in the fortunes of the tragic hero. Since he regards Discovery as an important element of a successful plot, in this chapter he further discusses the point, and lists six kinds of Recognition or Discovery:

1. The least artistic is the Recognition brought about by signs or marks. These signs may be by birth, or they may be acquired after birth as scars, etc. Further, these signs or tokens may be external, like necklaces, etc., which may bring about the discovery. To use such signs as proofs implies reflection, and such a use of them is inartistic. When used at all, their use must be spontaneous, not the result of thought but of chance.
2. Next come the discoveries introduced by the poet at will. Their use is arbitrary and so inartistic; they do not grow naturally and logically out of the plot. They are manipulated by the poet without regard to necessity and probability.
3. The third kind of discovery depends upon memory. It is a discovery made by a person whose memory is awakened by some-thing he sees or hears. He is reminded of the past, and the recognition follows.
4. The fourth kind of discovery is the discovery made through a process of reasoning. Through the process of reasoning one event is linked up with another till the truth is recognised.
5. It is hard to understand what Aristotle really means by, “the discovery arising from false reasoning on the side of the other party”. The examples he cites are obscure. **Miss Dorothy Sayers** says that it is the, “*Discovery by bluff*”, employed by detectives both in and out of fiction. Another interpretation is that Aristotle is here referring of the, “*device of laying false clues*”.
6. The best and the most artistic kind of discovery is the one which grows out of the action itself. Such a discovery is natural and credible, and it surprises and startles the readers.

Thus in this chapter the Greek philosopher has listed six, “kinds of recognition”, from least to the most artistic.

### Chs. XVII and XVIII: Some Practical Rules for Would-be Dramatists: Kinds of Tragedy

Chapter XVII is concerned with the process of constructing plays, and Aristotle lays down certain guidelines for this purpose. While constructing his plays, the poet should do three things. First, he should imaginatively visualise the action, secondly, he should work out the emotions with the very ‘gestures’ of his dramatic personages, and thirdly, he should begin with the ‘universal form’ of the plot, adding the names and episodes later. Visualisation means imaginative sympathy; it

means that the poet actually sees the scene with his mind's eye, and this would enable him to keep out the impossible, the improbable, and the ludicrous from his play. The poet should try to feel the emotions of his characters, and only then he would be able to write out the speeches which express those emotions effectively. Not only that, he should also act the parts of his dramatic personages to see if the speeches he has penned for them are appropriate or not. If he wishes his audience to weep, he must first feel the sorrow himself. Effective characterisation is possible only in this way.

Aristotle has been criticised for saying nothing about poetic inspiration. However, he does speak of, "a touch of madness", in the poet, which makes him besides himself with emotion. This is his recognition of poetic inspiration. The poet, he says, must be a specially gifted man, and, if not, he must be inspired. Poetry may be a craft, but inspiration, too, is often essential.

The poet should first draw the general outline of the plot without any names and in this way impart universality to his story. The story itself may be either his own invention or traditional (borrowed from history or legend), but he must fill up the sketch by episodes of his own invention. This episodizing constitutes the plot, and it is in this respect that the 'poet' is really, 'the maker'. Thus, as **Humphrey House** discusses at length, episodizing here is not the derogatory term of common usage. It has been used in a technical sense for the events and incidents which the poet invents to lengthen out the story. They are logically connected with each other and are an essential part of the plot. Indeed, they, constitute the plot. "A failure in the 'episodising' produces a series of isolated episodes not joined to each other by probability or necessity."

The giving of proper names to the characters is also an important aspect of the process of dramatic construction. The assignment of names determines whether the drama will be fiction, myth, or history, and provides guidance in characterisation.

Continuing with his rules for the practical guidance of dramatists; Aristotle emphasises the significance of complication and denouement. Denouement is more difficult to manage than complication, and a dramatist must be very careful while working out his denouement.

Four different kinds of tragedy are then listed, according to the four constituent elements of a tragedy

1. *the complex tragedy* with reversals (peripety) and (Anagnorisis) recognitions,
2. *the tragedy of suffering*. This kind of tragedy depicts painful events, such as wounds, deaths, and the like. It derives its effect from incidents of a pitiable and fearful nature,
3. *the tragedy of character*. "in which the speeches revealing character are important in themselves rather than as steps toward the final episode." "The sense of forward movement will be weak, and the play will tend to become a series of dramatic monologues" – (O.B. Hardison). Aristotle's emphasis on the primacy of plot is well-known and though he recognises a tragedy of character, he tends to regard it as an inferior kind, and
4. *lastly, there is the tragedy of Spectacle*. It is the tragedy which depends upon sensational effects produced by the actors, the costume designer, and other mechanical and artificial devices. The adventures are fantastic, the figures gigantic, and scene of action is frequently the nether world.

Each of the four kinds of tragedies owes its effectiveness to a different element, and the dramatist should try to unite all these varied excellences and interests. Moreover, he should remember that a tragedy is not an epic, and so he must not overload it with a multiplicity of details and actions. Such plurality of action is confusing, and it also weakens the tragic effect.

In the end, Aristotle advises the dramatist to mark *The Chorus* an integral part to his action. It should participate in the action like the other characters.

## Ch. XIX: Thought in Tragedy

In chapter VI, Aristotle analysed tragedy into six parts. He has already discussed Plot and Character in detail, and touched upon Song and Spectacle. He now comes to Diction and Thought. Thought is treated in this chapter, and the following three chapters are devoted to the treatment of Diction.

Notes

The thought of the characters is expressed through their speeches, and hence the intimate relation between thought and diction. Diction is the objectification of Thought, the vehicle through which Thought finds expression.

There are three ways in which thought – the intellectual element – expresses itself:

1. **Proof and Refutation:** Thought expresses itself in the arguments which the characters use to prove or disprove something. They may try to establish their own point of view or refute the arguments advanced by the other characters.
2. **Production of emotional effects:** Today we tend to separate thought and emotion, but for the classics emotion was a mode of persuasion, and hence could be considered as a variety of thought. The speaker may introduce into his speech a variety of emotions in order to persuade and convince. "Thought, then, is present both in speeches that involve reasoning and in speeches intended to reveal the emotions of the speaker" – (O.B. Hardison).
3. **Indications of the importance or significance of anything:** By this statement Aristotle means that thought is also expressed in speeches which are intended to exaggerate or diminish the importance of anything. Through their speeches the characters may make something look more noble and significant, or more trivial and base than it really is.

Thought appears in the speeches the dramatist composes, speeches which are appropriate or adapted to the particular circumstances and situations of the tragedy. It is the response of the character concerned to these situations. It is the plot which primarily expresses this reaction, but the effect of the plot is reinforced by the verbal expression of the thought of the characters. This is the function of speech in tragedy.

The thought or intellectual element of a tragedy can best be understood by those who have a knowledge of the art of rhetoric, and so Aristotle himself refers his readers to his *Rhetoric*.

### Chs. XX, XXI, XXII: Diction and Style

Aristotle deals with Diction of Tragedy in detail in these three chapters. Much of it is highly technical, and is based exclusively on Greek grammar, Syntax and usage. Moreover, the topic is not so much a part of literary criticism as that of grammar. Hence we give below only a brief resume of the significant aspects of Aristotle's discussion.

Diction is the choice and arrangement of words and images in a literary composition. The words which a poet uses, says Aristotle, may be divided into six kinds:

1. those current in ordinary speech;
2. foreign terms imported from other languages, or from dialect, like, "fey", or, "ennui"; or
3. those which are metaphorical like, 'cold-blooded';
4. the ornamental periphrasis beloved of eighteenth century poet;
5. new coinages like, "jabberwock", or, "the fairy mimbling-mambling in the garden"; and
6. forms not entirely invented, but modified by lengthening as in the case of 'faery', by shortening as in, "sovrán", or by simple variation as, "corse", for, "corpse".

Now the poet's style, Aristotle proceeds, should fulfil, above all, two conditions: "it must be clear and it must not be mean". If it uses only, "current", words, it will be clear but mean, as Wordsworth often is; if it uses only strange words, it will be not mean, but either obscure or jargon, like parts of Sir Thomas Browne or Francis Thompson. Accordingly, "modified", words, variant forms, are useful as being neither mean nor obscure. Compounded words, he thinks, are best for the dithyamb (full-dress lyric or ode), rare words suit epic; whereas metaphorical diction is best suited to the iambic verse of drama. For this is the metre closest to the prose of ordinary life, as befits an imitation of that life; and a poetic diction which is mainly metaphorical can similarly keep closest to the language of ordinary life. "The gift for metaphor" adds Aristotle, "is the greatest of all. This alone cannot be thought, but is a mark of natural genius; for it implies an inborn eye for likenesses."

To the far-reaching truth of this last statement, disguised as usual in the simple, casual language of Aristotle, criticism usually does little justice. It is not fully realized how much the art of poetry



consists in the somewhat childish pleasure of realising that one thing is like another; in revealing unseen similarities between the unlikeliest objects in the vast, treasure-house of the Universe.

“This gift of metaphor is, indeed, one of the hardest thing to preserve, when literature becomes literary; and writers like Burns and Synge have succeeded in breathing fresh life into the jaded style of convention, simply by going back to the plain vigour of the poor and uneducated, whose minds and vocabulary, instead of dealing in ghostly abstractions, cling still to the concrete”

— (F.L. Locus).

Aristotle’s treatment of Metaphor is clear, concise and inspired.

### Ch. XXIII: The Epic

Having examined tragedy in detail, Aristotle now comes to the epic, which narrates in versified language, and does not imitate as tragedy does. But there are a number of points of resemblance between the epic and the drama. In epic, as in drama, the unity of the story is a point of capital importance. It is not enough that it should relate the events of a single period or of one man’s career. The story must have, ‘a beginning, a middle, and an end’, the parts must be subordinate and coherent to the whole.

Although in this chapter Aristotle says that in the unity of his two epic stories, Homer shows his, ‘marvellous superiority’ he admits in chapter XVIII that the *Iliad* with its, ‘plurality of stories’ cannot be successfully dramatised, and in Chap. XXVI that less unity is required in an epic than in a drama.

Aristotle also praises Homer for the skill with which he uses episodes to increase the length of his epic, and impart variety to it.

### Ch. XXIV: Epic and Tragedy

In this chapter, Aristotle continues with his discussion of the Epic, and compares it with the tragedy to highlight its salient features.

The epic has as many kinds as the tragedy. It may be simple or complex, its effect may be predominantly due either to character-drawing or to tragic, ‘suffering’. But obviously there can be no species of epic, as of tragedy, which depends for its effect on ‘spectacle’. The constituent elements of an epic are the same as those of a tragedy, with the exception of spectacle and choric song.

An epic poem can be longer than a tragedy and can present events occurring simultaneously at different places, which adds to the richness and variety of interest; and it has another advantage in being able to describe ‘marvels’ which cannot be represented on the stage. It differs also in metre, since experience has proved that there is only one metre in which epic poetry can be written—the ‘heroic’.

As in his treatment of drama, Aristotle is practical here also. He keeps in view the application of his theory in practice. And for this purpose, he takes Homer as the supreme model of artistic unity, of dramatic construction, of the author’s role in epic (he should speak as little as possible in his own character), and above all of the art which is essential both in epic and dramatic poetry, the art of, ‘telling lies in the right way’. Homer, for example, knows how to make the improbable look probable and convincing. He introduces only probable improbabilities.

The effect of poetry, Aristotle tells us, is due to a logical fallacy so used by the author and the reader or spectator accepts as real, events which could not possibly happen. It all depends upon illusion, on what Coleridge calls, ‘a willing suspension of disbelief’. It is futile to present events which are possible or, indeed, historically true, if in the representation, they become unconvincing. Probability (i.e. convincingness) is the criterion of success.

The marvellous and the irrational may be introduced, but it should be done sparingly. Plots which require frequent use of the marvellous must be avoided. The greatness of Homer is seen in the way in which he hides the improbabilities of his plots by the poetic charm with which he invests them.



Notes

Ornate, refined diction is to be used with caution, for it tends to obscure character and thought. Hence, it should be used only when there is a pause in action, and no thought or character is being expressed. Aristotle's plea is for simplicity and clarity in the use of language.

### Ch. XXV: Objections of Critics and Aristotle's Answer to such Criticism

In this chapter, Aristotle examines a work of art from the reader's or critic's point of view, and not from the point of view of the Artist, as he had been doing so far. He first examines the objections of critics one by one, and then proceeds to answer such criticism. *The chapter is highly technical, and of little significance from the examination point of view.*

In the last paragraph of the chapter, Aristotle says that he has given twelve answers to five kinds of censure. The five are: impossibility, irrationality (or improbability), immorality, contradiction and lack of technical correctness.

Aristotle answers these charges as follows:

#### 1. Answers to the charge of impossibility

- (i) Although one should generally avoid impossibilities, they are sometimes justified when they support, "the goal of imitation". As an example, Aristotle cites Homer's depiction of the pursuit of Hector. We know from Chapter XXIV that this is, "marvellous", and is justified in Homer because it is not represented on the stage, where it would seem ludicrous. Since, "the marvellous", is desirable in poetic art, it is justified.
- (ii) Some impossibilities are "accidental" rather than essential. Aristotle cites the example of a representation of a hind without horns. This is impossible according to the art of zoology; but it does not violate poetic truth. It is, therefore, not of much consequence.
- (iii) The impossibility may be caused by the poet's wish to present a character, "as he ought to be" rather than, "as he is". Sophocles tended in this direction, whereas Euripides was more realistic. This defence, of course, echoes both Chapter II and the requirement of goodness laid down in Chapter XV.

#### 2. Answers to the charge of irrationality

- (i) The charge of irrationality may be met by reference to received opinion. Men often believe what is false the Furies who pursue Orestes in the *Eumenides* are examples; and the poet can use such beliefs without making any artistic error.
- (ii) The charge can also be met by pointing out that many things that seem irrational in one period were common practice in earlier periods. Homer's statement that the Greeks held their spears, "upright on their spikes", would have seemed erroneous to a contemporary of Aristotle, but the practice was customary in Homeric times.

#### 3. An answer to the charge of immorality

Only one answer is given to the charge of immorality. The critic, says Aristotle, must consider not only the statement or deed but also its context. In particular, he should decide, "whether the object is to achieve a greater good or to avoid a greater evil." Striking a person, for example, is an evil in itself; but to strike an assassin in order to prevent him from killing someone is clearly good.

#### 4. Answers to the charge of lack of correctness

- (i) The first answer is that the poet was using a strange word or metaphor. As we know, poets do not use such devices of their own free will, they are obliged to use them by the necessities of poetic art. Aristotle here devotes major emphasis to explaining strange words.
- (ii) The poet may have used poetic license, creating a difficulty that can be resolved by changing the accent.
- (iii) Poetic syntax is sometimes ambiguous, and difficulties may be resolved by changing the punctuation.
- (iv) Poetic language is sometimes ambiguous.
- (v) Poetic language often incorporates common usages that involve misuse of standard words.

### 5. An answer to the charge of contradiction

Only one answer is given. When a passage seems to involve contradictions, we are to consider all its possible senses and then select the one that seems most probable. Aristotle takes the occasion to censure critics who assign an impossible meaning to a passage without considering the alternatives and then attack the poet for writing absurdities.

## Ch. XXVI: Epic and Tragedy: The Superiority of Tragedy

*The Poetics*, as we have it, ends with a comparison of Tragic and Epic poetry. Tragedy has been criticised as vulgar, because its appeal is to the crowd and acting can easily become theatrical and exaggerated. But that is not the poet's fault; besides, epic recitation is sometimes similarly vulgarized. Moreover, acting is not essential for the effect of tragedy, which can be fully felt even by a reader.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) Tragedy is an imitation of ...
  - (a) an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.
  - (b) several kinds being found in separate parts of the play.
  - (c) in the form of action, not of narrative.
  - (d) through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.
- (ii) Which of the following lines of the definition of tragedy deals with the function of tragedy?
  - (a) an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.
  - (b) several kinds being found in separate parts of the play.
  - (c) in the form of action, not of narrative.
  - (d) through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.
- (iii) Aristotle classifies various forms of art with the help of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of their imitation of life.
 

(a) Words, colours and music.	(b) Serious, comic and real aspect of life.
(c) Object, medium and manner.	(d) Action, narration and recitation.
- (iv) According to Aristotle metre / verse alone is the distinguishing feature of poetry or imaginative literature in general..
  - (a) True
  - (b) False
  - (c) Cannot say
- (v) Who summarizes Aristotle's views in reply to Plato's charges in brief: "Tragedy (Art) gives new knowledge, yields aesthetic satisfaction and produces a better state of mind."
 

(a) Buwater	(b) Scott-James
(c) David Daiches	(d) S.H. Butcher
- (vi) Aristotle did not agree with Plato in calling the poet an imitator and creative art, imitation.
  - (a) True
  - (b) False
  - (c) Cannot say

## 2.3 Summary

- Tragedy is:
  - (i) the imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude;
  - (ii) in language embellished by artistic ornament;

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- (iii) in the form of action, not narrative;
- (iv) through pity and fear effecting the purgation of these emotions;
- (v) having different parts, some using the medium of verse alone, others with the aid of song.
- Every tragedy has Six parts: Plot; **Character; Diction; Thought; Spectacle; Song.**
- Tragedy is the imitation of an action and of life. Character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Therefore, dramatic action is not with a view to the representation of character (which is subsidiary to the action). The incidents and plot are the end of a tragedy...and the end is the chief thing of all.
- Without action there cannot be tragedy; there may be tragedy without character. (speeches expressive of character, however well finished in Diction and Thought, do not produce the essential tragic effect so well as a plot which has artistically constructed incidents). The end of tragedy is pleasure, understanding of the universal and the purgation of emotions.
- Elements of emotional interest in tragedy are: Anagnorisis (Recognition) and Peripeteia (Reversal). It is best if they coincide. Therefore, in order of importance the elements of a tragedy are;
  - (i) Plot,
  - (ii) character,
  - (iii) Thought,
  - (iv) Diction,
  - (v) Song,
  - (vi) Spectacle.
- Plot
  - (i) It must be a whole, with a beginning after which the middle and end follow naturally on each other.
  - (ii) It must be of a certain magnitude, neither too large nor too small.
  - (iii) It must have unity, but unity of plot is not just unity of hero. The unity of the plot consists in the structural union of the parts which are so arranged that, if one part is removed or displaced, the whole will be spoilt. ( If the part removed does not make any difference, it is not an organic part of the whole. )
  - (iv) Poetry is more philosophical than history, which relates what has actually happened, while poetry expresses what may happen. Poetry is more universal, History more particular.
  - (v) Plot must be imitation of action inspiring fear or pity; this effect is produced best when it is surprising. It is heightened when they follow as cause and effect.
  - (vi) Complex plots will contain Reversal and Recognition. It is best when these coincide ( as in Oedipus Tyrannus.
  - (vii) Another element in tragedy is the scene of suffering.
  - (viii) The best tragedy should concern a man renowned and prosperous, who is not eminently good and just, but one whose misfortune is brought about not by vice, but by some frailty or error (Hamartia).
  - (ix) Fear and pity may be aroused by some spectacular means, but it is better if they result from the inner structure of the play.
  - (x) Actions must be those of people who are not naturally enemies; (if an enemy kills an enemy, no pity is excited except in so far as the suffering is pitiful in itself. ) The best type of plot is when e.g. a brother kills a brother (or intends to), a son his father, etc. It is not tragic if a bad man comes to a bad end (no pity). It is not tragic if a bad man becomes good by Reversal. (more like Comedy)

- Character
  - (i) It must be good. (Even a woman, in this context, can be good. )
  - (ii) It must aim at being appropriate..the right type e.g. a man should be brave, but a woman should not necessarily be brave, neither should she be unscrupulously clever.
  - (iii) It must be true to life...realism.
  - (iv) It must be consistent. The poet should aim at either the necessary or the probable so that it is credible.
  - (v) The 'deus ex machina should only be used for events external to the drama: for antecedent or subsequent events or those beyond the range of human knowledge.
  - (vi) The poet should preserve the type, but ennoble it.
- Thought
 

This consists of every effect which has to be produced by speech; proof and refutation. excitation of the feelings. suggestion of importance or its opposite .

Thought is one of the causes of action...it covers the mind's activities from reasoning. perception and formulation of emotion.

Thought is expressed in speeches and is therefore closely linked to
- Diction
 

This covers language and its use..the way command. request. prayer. statement. or question is expressed.

Aristotle turns to study Rhetoric and analysis of word, sentence, letter, syllable, connecting word, case (inflection) or phrase; each is technically examined.

He also examines metaphor ( e.g. light and darkness in the OEDIPUS TYR.) and lyric poetry especially in choral odes.
- Diction, Song and Spectacle are concerned with the production of the play. They are therefore essential parts of tragedy, but concern the poet less than the first three elements.
 

N.B. Refer to Functions of the Chorus

THE CHORUS should be regarded as one of the actors and even of greater importance because it must be integral a "sine qua non". and it is therefore unifying.

N.B. In the earliest tragedy we have, Aeschylus' "Suppliant Women", the Chorus are the subject of the tragedy.-(eponymous)

(They are on the stage from nearly the beginning until the end. )
- Recognition
 

There are four different methods:

  - (i) By signs (bodily marks) least artistic.
  - (ii) Invented at will by poet ...e.g. Orestes in the "Iphigenia".
  - (iii) By memory being awakened e.g. by an object.
  - (iv) By a process of reasoning... e.g. as in the "CHOEPHORI".

Notes:

  - (i) Workout the questions as instructed.
  - (ii) Compare your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

Notes

## 2.4 Key-Words

1. Mememis : A Greek word for invitation
2. Magnitude : Length, size
3. Spectacle : Stage property

## 2.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss Aristotle definition and explanation of Tragedy.
2. What are the six formative elements in Tragedy?
3. Briefly describe Aristotle's explanation of Plot, Character.
4. Write a short note on the 'Poetics'.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (d)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (b)                      (v) (c)  
(vi) (b)

## 2.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Abrams, M.H. Geoffrey Harpham. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Delhi: Akash Press, 2007.
2. Aristotle. Poetics. Trans. S.H. Butcher. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1997.
3. Daiches, David. English Literature. California: University of California Press, 1968.
4. Daiches, David. The Penguin Companion of English Literature. London: McGraw-Hill, 1971.
5. Durham, W.H. Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century. UK: Russell and Russell, 1961.

## Unit 3: Aristotle: The Poetics-Catharsis and Hamartia

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the basics concepts of the Poetics.
- Discuss Aristotle's theory of Catharsis.
- Understand the concept of Hamartia.

### Introduction

According to Aristotle, the central character of a tragedy must not be so virtuous that we are outraged, instead of feeling pity or fear at his or her downfall. Also the character cannot be so evil that for the sake of justice we desire his or her misfortune. Instead, best is someone "who is neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness; nor is it through badness or villainy of his own that he falls into misfortune, but rather through some flaw [hamartia]". The character should be famous or prosperous, like Oedipus or Medea.

Hamartia, the character's fatal flaw, may consist of the following:

1. A hamartia may be simply an intellectual mistake or an error in judgement. For example when a character has the facts wrong or doesn't know when to stop trying to get dangerous information.
2. Hamartia may be a moral weakness, especially hubris, as when a character is moral in every way except for being prideful enough to insult a god.

Of course you are free to decide that the tragic hero of any play, ancient or modern, does not have a hamartia at all. The terms hamartia and hubris should become basic tools of your critical apparatus.

### 3.1 Aristotle's Poetics: Basic Concepts

1. Tragedies should not be episodic. That is, the episodes in the plot must have a clearly probable or inevitable connection with each other. This connection is best when it is believable but unexpected.
2. Complex plots are better than simple plots. Complex plots have recognitions and reversals. A recognition is a change from ignorance to knowledge, especially when the new knowledge identifies some unknown relative or dear one whom the hero should cherish but was about to harm or has just harmed. 'Recognition' (anagnorisis) is now commonly applied to any self-knowledge the hero gains as well as to insight to the whole nature or condition of mankind,



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- provided that that knowledge is associated, as Aristotle said it should be, with the hero's 'reversal of fortune' (Greek: peripeteia). A reversal is a change of a situation to its opposite. Consider Oedipus at the beginning and end of Oedipus the King. Also consider in that play how a man comes to free Oedipus of his fear about his mother, but actually does the opposite. Recognitions are also supposed to be clearly connected with all the rest of the action of the plot.
3. Suffering (some fatal or painful action) is also to be included in a tragic plot which, preferably, should end unhappily.
  4. The pity and fear which a tragedy evokes, should come from the events, the action, not from the mere sight of something on stage.
  5. Catharsis ('purification' or 'purgation') of pity and fear was a part of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. The meaning of this phrase is extremely debatable. Among the many interpretations possible, consider how well the following apply to our plays:
    - (i) Purification of the audience's feelings of pity and fear so that in real life we understand better whether we should feel them.
    - (ii) Purgation of our pity and fear so that we can face life with less of these emotions or more control over them.
    - (iii) Purification of the events of the plot, so that the central character's errors or transgressions become 'cleansed' by his or her recognitions and suffering.

### 3.2 Aristotle's Theory of Catharsis

As discussed in the explanation of the definition of tragedy (1.5.2), theory of Catharsis emerges as the function of tragedy. The last line of the definition -'through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these and similar emotions'- substantiates the theory of Catharsis. His theory of Catharsis consists in the purgation or purification of the excessive emotions of pity and fear. Witnessing the tragedy and suffering of the protagonist on the stage, such emotions and feelings of the audience is purged. The purgation of such emotions and feelings make them relieved and they emerge better human beings than they were. Thus, Aristotle's theory of Catharsis has moral and ennobling function.

But for the exact meaning and concept of catharsis, there has been a lot of controversy among scholars and critics down the centuries. The critics on catharsis by prolonged debated has succeeded only in creating confusion, not in clarifying the concept. Yet since Aristotle is vague in the usage of this word, critics have to interpret it on his behalf. Certain broad understanding of the term is necessary, though the attempts at deriving the doctrines regarding the functions of the tragedy from this are absurd and ridiculous.

In *the Poetics*, while defining tragedy, Aristotle writes that the function of tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, and in this way to affect the *Katharsis* of these (or such like) emotions. Aristotle has used the term *Katharsis* only once, but many and strange are the interpretations of the word that have been given ever since the Renaissance. No phrase, probably, in ancient or modern literature has been handled so frequently by commentators and critics, and by poets, and by men who know Greek, and by men who know no Greek. Most varied and ingenuous explanations have been given. This confusion arises from the fact that Aristotle himself has not explained what exactly he meant by the word, nor do we get any direct aid from *the Poetics* in interpreting the Greek phrase. For this reason, help and guidance has to be taken from his other works, more specially from his *Politics* and his second *Ethics*. Further, the Greek word *Katharsis* has three meanings. It means, "purgation", "purification", and "clarification", and each critic has used the word in one or the other of these varied senses, and has reached accordingly a different conclusion regarding the function and emotional effects of tragedy. All agree that Tragedy arouses fear and pity, but there are sharp differences as to the process, the way, by which the rousing of these emotions gives pleasure. We would first examine the different interpretations of the word *Catharsis*, and then give the interpretation which seems most appealing and convincing.

## “Purgation” Theories

Notes

1. *Katharsis* has been taken to be a medical metaphor, ‘purgation’, denoting a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine on the body. By some the process has been likened to homeopathic treatment with the like curing the like, and thus, it is said, the rousing of pity and fear results in the ‘purgation’, of these emotion. This view is borne out by a passage in *the Poetics* where Aristotle refers to religious frenzy being cured by certain tunes which excite religious frenzy. It is this view that Milton also expresses in the *Preface to Samson Agonistes*, when he says that tragedy by rousing pity and fear purges the mind of these or such like emotions, that is, “tempers or reduces them to a just measure”. In Tragedy, “pity and fear, artificially stirred, expel the latent pity and fear which we bring with us from real life.” Such incidental emotions as anxiety, self-pity, etc., are also quieted. In our sympathy for the sufferer on the stage, we forget our own troubles and worries. “In the pleasurable calm which follows when the passion is spent, an emotional cure is wrought.” Used in the medical sense, *Katharsis* implies relief following previous excitation of the tragic emotions. Important critics like **Twining** and **Barney** (1957), are also of the view that *Katharsis* is a kind of homeopathic treatment. **Freud** and other psychologists also support this interpretation, when they say that by helping patients to recall painful childhood experiences, neurosis can be cured.
2. In the neo-classical era, *Catharsis* was taken to be an allopathic treatment with the unlike curing unlike. In this respect, they followed the lead given by **Giraldi Cinthio** of 16th century Italy. Thus the arousing of pity and fear was supposed to bring about the purgation or, ‘evacuation’, of other emotions, like anger, pride, etc. (Instead of pity and fear, admiration and commiseration were supposed to be the proper tragic emotions). The spectacle of suffering arouses our pity and fear and we are ‘purged’ of the emotions that caused the suffering. If the suffering is caused by emotions, like anger, hatred, or impiety towards the gods, we are ‘purged’ of such undesirable emotions, because we realise their evil consequences. “*We learn from the terrible fates of evil men to avoid the vices they manifest*” **Thomas Taylor** in his introduction to *the Poetics* (1618) also held this view

## Psychological Interpretation

3. **F.L. Lucas** rejects the idea that *Katharsis* as used by Aristotle is medical metaphor, and says that, “the theatre is not a hospital”. Both **F.L. Lucas** and **Herbert Reed** regard it as a kind of safety valve. Pity and fear are aroused, we give free play to these emotions, which we cannot do in real life, and this safe and free outlet of these emotions is followed by emotional relief. In real life they are repressed, and in the theater the free indulgence in these emotions aroused by the suffering of the hero, is safe and brings relief to our pent up souls.
4. **I.A. Richards’** approach to the process is also psychological. Fear is the impulse to withdraw and pity is the impulse to approach. Both these impulses are harmonised and blended in tragedy, and this balance brings relief and repose.

## Ethical and Theological Interpretations

5. The ethical interpretation is that the tragic process is a kind of lustration of the soul, an inner illumination resulting in a more balanced attitude to life and its suffering. Thus **John Gassner** says that, “only enlightenment, a clear comprehension of what was involved in the struggle, an understanding of cause and effect, a judgment on what we have witnessed”, can result in a state of mental equilibrium and rest, and can ensure complete aesthetic gratification. Tragedy makes us realise that divine law operates in the universe, shaping everything for the best.
6. During the Renaissance, **Robertello** and **Castelvetro** suggested that Tragedy helped to harden or ‘temper’ the emotions. “Just as soldiers overcome their fear of death after seeing it frequently on the battlefield, so spectators become hardened to the pitiable and fearful events of life by witnessing them in tragedies.”

## Notes

**The Purification Theory**

7. Thus the critical wrangling has gone on through the ages. It is forgotten that the Greek word, *Katharsis*, has three meanings. It means 'purgation' a medical term, and 'purification', and also 'clarification'. Now Aristotle had medical leanings: his father was a doctor and he himself was keenly interested in the science. But he had no religious leanings, and hence it has been supposed that he used the word in the medical sense alone. Advocates of the "purgation" theory cite the passage towards the end of *Politics*, referred to above, where he speaks of religious frenzy or mania being cured by certain religious tunes. This reminds us of Plato's concept of internal agitation being quelled by an external agitation, as in the case of a child whom the nurse rocks so that he may go to sleep. From all this evidence, the critics conclude that Aristotle's conception of '*Katharsis*' is that of homeopathic treatment. It is a sort of mental cure brought about by the excitation of the emotions of pity and fear, and the purgation of all that is morbid and painful in these emotions. They are thus reduced to a just measure. However, **Humphrey House** does not agree with this view. He rejects the idea of 'purgation' in the medical sense of the term, and becomes the most forceful advocate of the '*purification*' theory, which involves the idea of moral instruction and moral learning. It is a kind of, "moral conditioning", which the spectators undergo. In his scholarly and penetrating discussion of the whole question, **Humphrey House** points out, "purgation means cleansing". Now cleansing may be a, 'quantitative evacuation', or a "qualitative change" in the body brought about by a restoration of proper equilibrium; and a state of health depends on the maintenance of this equilibrium. Tragedy by arousing pity and fear, instead of suppressing them, trains them and brings back the soul to a balanced state. He refers to Aristotle's, *Nicomachean Ethics* and other works and regards *Katharsis* as an educative, and controlling process. In his *Ethics* Aristotle writes: "Virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue, for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in them there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right time, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is characteristic and best, and this is the characteristic of virtue." Tragedy rouses pity and fear from potentiality to actuality through suitable stimuli, it controls and trains them by directing them to the right objects in the right way; and exercises them, within the limits of the play, as the emotions of the good and the wise should be exercised. When they subside to potentiality again after the play, it is a more trained potentiality than before. Our emotional responses have been trained and brought nearer to the responses of the wise and good. A qualitative change has been brought about in our system of emotional responses, and the result is emotional health. In Milton's phrase they have been "tempered and reduced to a just measure". The proper development and balance of the emotions depends upon their habitual direction towards worthy objects. This, "controlling and educative" theory, says **Humphrey House**, is in keeping with Aristotle's entire philosophy.

Thus according to, 'the purification' theory, *Katharsis* implies that our emotions are purified of excess and defect, are reduced to intermediate state, trained and directed towards the right objects at the right time, and, in this way, we are made virtuous and good. Thus *Katharsis* is a kind of moral conditioning. When witnessing a tragedy, the spectator learns the proper use of pity, fear, and similar emotion. **Butcher**, too agrees, with the advocates of the 'purification' theory, when he writes, "the tragic *Katharsis* involves not only the idea of emotional relief, but the further idea of purifying the emotions to relieved". He adds, "The poets found out how the transport of human pity and human fear might, under the excitation of art, be dissolved in joy, and the pain escape in the purified tide of human sympathy."

**Basic Inadequacy of the above Theories**

However, neither the 'purgation' theory nor the 'purification' theory explains the whole thing. The basic defect of these theories is that they are too much occupied with the psychology of the audience, with speculations regarding the effect of tragedy on those who come to the theatre. It is forgotten that Aristotle was writing a treatise, not on psychology, but on the art of poetry. He is

more concerned, with the technique, the way in which an ideal tragedy can be written, and its nature, than with its psychological effects. For this reason, eminent modern critics like **Leon Golden**, **O.B. Hardison**, and **G.E. Else** advocate the, “clarification” theory. **Leon Golden** translates the relevant part of Aristotle’s famous definition of tragedy as, “.....through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, tragedy achieves the *Catharsis* of such incidents.”

Thus he relates ‘*Catharsis*’ not to the emotions of the spectators, as in the other two theories, but to the incidents which form the plot of the tragedy, to what happens in the tragedy itself. And the result is the “clarification” theory which we have now to consider in some detail.

### The Clarification Theory

As **O.B. Hardison** points out, indications as to Aristotle’s meaning of the word *Catharsis* are provided by *The Poetics* itself. While writing of the pleasure of imitative art in Chapter IV, he says that the pleasure produced is associated with learning and that it is a pleasure enjoyed by men in general, as well as by the philosopher. He points out that, if well imitated, pictures even of corpses and ugly animals give pleasure. The paradox of pleasure being aroused by the ugly and the repellent in everyday life is also the paradox involved in tragedy. Tragic incidents are pitiable and fearful. They include even such horrible events as a man blinding himself, a wife murdering her husband, or a mother slaying her children. Such incidents instead of repelling us, as they would do in life, produce pleasure when presented in a great tragedy. *This is the tragic paradox : this is the pleasure peculiar to tragedy.* Aristotle clearly tells us that we should not seek for every pleasure from tragedy, “but only the pleasure proper to it.” ‘*Catharsis*’ refers to the tragic variety of pleasure. To provide such pleasure is the function of tragedy, as well as the reason why men write, present, and witness tragedies. The *Catharsis* clause is thus a definition of the function of tragedy and not of its emotional effects on the audience. In the view of **O.B. Hardison**, most translators have erred in relating *Catharsis*, not, to the incidents of the tragedy, but to the emotions of pity and fear excited in the audience.



*Did u know?* “Othello in the modern drama, Oedipus in the ancient, are the two most conspicuous examples of ruin wrought by character, noble indeed, but not without defects, acting in the dark and, as it seemed, for the best.”

### The Cathartic Process – a Process of Learning

How does the pleasure proper to tragedy arise ? Imitation does not produce pleasure in general, but only the sort of pleasure that comes from learning, and so also the peculiar pleasure of tragedy. Now learning comes from discovering the relation that exists between the particular object or action represented and certain universal elements embodied in it. The poet, might take his material from history or tradition, but he selects and orders it in terms of probability and necessity, and represents what, “might be”, rather than, “what is”. He rises from the particular to the general and so is more universal, and more conducive to understanding – more philosophical as Aristotle puts it – than history which deals with the particular alone. The events depicted in the tragedy are presented free of chance and accidents which obscure their real meaning and significance, and thus tragedy enhances understanding and leaves the spectator, in **Butcher’s** words, “face to face with the universal law”.

The tragic poet begins by selecting a series of incidents that are intrinsically pitiable or fearful. He may borrow them from history or legend, or invent them as do most modern writers. “He then presents them in such a way as to bring out the probable or necessary principles that unite them in a single action and determine their relation to this action as it proceeds from its beginning to its end. When the spectator has witnessed a tragedy of this type, he will have learned something – the incidents will be clarified in the sense that their relation, in terms of universals, will have become manifest – and the act of learning, says Aristotle, will be enjoyable.”

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Thus according to this interpretation 'Catharsis' means clarification of the essential and universal significance of the incidents depicted, leading to an enhanced understanding of the universal law which governs human life and destiny, and such an understanding, even when the incidents depicted are ugly or repellent, leads to pleasure, the proper pleasure of tragedy. In this view, *Catharsis* is neither a medical term, nor a religious or moral one, but an intellectual one. It refers neither to the purgation of the painful, the excessive, and the morbid, in the emotional responses of the audience, neither does it refer to the purification or moral conditioning of their emotions. The term does not refer to the psychology of the audience at all. It refers to the incidents depicted in the tragedy, and the way in which by his artistic treatment, the poet reveals their universal significance. '*Catharsis*' is a process of learning and therefore, pleasurable.

### Clarification Theory: Its Merits

The clarification theory has many merits. In the first place, it interprets the clause as a reference to the technique of the tragedy and not to the psychology for the audience, and thus recognises the true nature of *the Poetics* as a technical treatise. Secondly, the theory is based on what Aristotle says in *The Poetics* itself, and needs not the help and support of what Aristotle has said in his other works on *Politics* and *Ethics*. Thirdly, it relates *Catharsis* both to the theory of imitation outlined in Chapters I-IV, and to the discussion of probability and necessity in Chapter IX. Fourthly, the theory is perfectly in accord with current aesthetic theories. To quote a few examples : **Francis Fergusson** uses the word 'Perception'. **James Joyce** 'Epiphany' or inner vision, and **Austen Warren** uses, "rage for order", to indicate the nature of the satisfaction or pleasure derived from tragedy. What all these critics mean to say is that the experience of tragedy is a kind of, "*insight experience*", and this experience is pleasurable, because it is a kind of learning, the learning of the true relation between the particular incidents of the plot and the universal law of human life. The phrase, "*inside experience*", used by modern critics to designate the function of tragedy, is very much like Aristotle's *Catharsis* when interpreted to mean, 'clarification'.

### 'Purgation' and 'Purification', only Incidental

However, it must be remembered that according to Aristotle the basic tragic emotions are pity and fear, and both these are painful emotions. If tragedy is to give pleasure – pleasure that comes from learning – the pity and fear, or at least the painful element in them, must somehow or the other be eliminated. Fear is aroused when we see someone like us suffering, and apprehend that a similar fate might befall us, and so it causes great pain. Pity is a feeling of pain caused by the sight of undeserved suffering of others, suffering, which we might expect to befall us also. Pity and fear are reciprocal and painful. The events of tragedy are pitiable because they seem, "undeserved", and fearful because we fear that they may happen to us. In the tragedy, the spectator sees that it is tragic error or *hamartia* of the hero which results in suffering, and so he learns something about the universal relation between character and destiny. By the end, he perceives a coherent relation between the hero's, character and his fate. "This will alleviate (if not eliminate) his pity and by the same token reduce his fear for himself. Note that the alleviation is a by product of the learning that produces the tragic pleasure, not its chief object" – (**O.B. Hardison**). *Thus there is some 'purgation' or 'purification', but it is merely incidental and secondary.*



*Did u know?* *Hamartia* is an error, or a series of errors, "whether morally culpable or not," committed by an otherwise noble person, and these errors derive him to his doom. The tragic irony lies in the fact that hero may err mistakenly without any evil intention, yet he is doomed no less than immoral who sin consciously. He has *Hamartia* and as a result his very virtues hurry him to his ruin.



### 3.3 Hamartia

Notes

Hamartia is a concept used by Aristotle to describe tragedy. Hamartia leads to the fall of a noble man caused by some excess or mistake in behavior, not because of a willful violation of the gods' laws. Hamartia is related to hubris, which was also more an action than attitude. Hamartia is an injury committed in ignorance (when the person affected or the results are not what the agent supposed they were). In tragedy, hamartia is often described as a hero's fatal flaw. It is a term developed by Aristotle in his work *Poetics*. The word hamartia is rooted in the notion of missing the mark (hamartanein) and covers a broad spectrum that includes ignorant, mistaken, or accidental wrongdoing, as well as deliberate iniquity, error, or sin.

This form of drawing emotion from the audience is a staple of the Greek tragedies. In Greek tragedy, stories that contain a character with a hamartia often follow a similar blueprint. The hamartia, as stated, is seen as an error in judgment or unwitting mistake is applied to the actions of the hero. For example, the hero might attempt to achieve a certain objective X; by making an error in judgment, however, the hero instead achieves the opposite of X, with disastrous consequences.

However, hamartia cannot be sharply defined or have an exact meaning assigned to it. Consequently, a number of alternate interpretations have been associated with it, such as in the Bible. Hamartia is the Greek word used to denote "sin." Bible translators may reach this conclusion, according to T. C. W. Stinton, because another common interpretation of hamartia can be seen as a "moral deficit" or a "moral error". R. D. Dawe disagrees with Stinton's view when he points out in some cases hamartia can even mean to not sin. It can be seen in this opposing context if the main character does not carry out an action because it is a sin. This failure to act, in turn, must lead to a poor change in fortune for the main character in order for it to truly be a hamartia.

In a medical context, a hamartia denotes a focal malformation consisting of disorganized arrangement of tissue types that are normally present in the anatomical area.

#### History of Hamartia

Aristotle first introduced hamartia in his book *Poetics*. However through the years the word has changed meanings. Many scholars have argued that the meaning of the word that was given in Aristotle's book is not really the correct meaning, and that there is a deeper meaning behind the word. In the article "Tragic Error in the Poetics of Aristotle," the scholar J.M. Bremer first explained the general argument of the poetics and, in particular, the immediate context of the term. He then traces the semasiological history of the hamart-group of the words from Homer (who also tried to determine the meaning behind the word) and Aristotle, concluding that of the three possible meanings of hamartia (missing, error, offense), the Stagirite uses the second in our passage of *Poetics*. It is, then a "tragic error", i.e. a wrong action committed in ignorance of its nature, effect, etc., which is the starting point of a causally connected train of events ending in disaster. Today the word and its meaning is still up in the air; even so the word is still being used in discussion of many plays today, such as *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*.

#### Major examples of Hamartia in Literature

Hamartia is often referred to as tragic flaw and has many examples throughout literature, especially in Greek tragedy. Isabel Hyde discusses the type of hamartia Aristotle meant to define in the *Modern Language Review*, "Thus it may be said by some writers to be the 'tragic flaw' of Oedipus that he was hasty in temper; of Samson that he was sensually uxorious; of Macbeth that he was excessively ambitious; of Othello that he was proud and jealous-and so on... but these things do not constitute the 'hamartia of those characters in Aristotle's sense". This explains that Aristotle did not describe hamartia as an error of character, but as a moral mistake or ignorant error. Even J.L. Moles comments on the idea that hamartia is considered an error and states, "the modern view (at least until recently) that it means 'error', 'mistake of fact', that is, an act done in ignorance of some salient circumstances".



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Hyde goes on to question the meaning of true hamartia and discovers that it is in fact error in the article, "The Tragic Flaw: Is It a Tragic Error?" She claims that the true hamartia that occurs in Oedipus is considered "his ignorance of his true parentage" that led him to become "unwittingly the slayer of his own father". This example can be applied when reading literature in regards to the true definition of hamartia and helps place the character's actions into the categories of character flaws and simple mistakes all humans commit.



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Aristotle's dictum is quite justified on the principle that, "higher the state, the greater the fall that follows," or because heavens themselves blame forth the death of princes, while the death of a beggar passes unnoticed. But it should be remembered that Aristotle nowhere says that the hero should be a king or at least royally descended. They were the Renaissance critics who distorted Aristotle and made the qualification more rigid and narrow.

What is this error of judgement. The term Aristotle uses here, hamartia, often translated "tragic flaw," (A.C.Brady) has been the subject of much debate. Aristotle, as writer of the Poetics, had many a lusty infant, begot by some other critic, left howling upon his doorstep; and of all these (which include the bastards Unity-of-Time and Unity-of-Place) not one is more trouble to those who got to take it up than the foundling 'Tragic Flaw'. Humphrey House, in his lectures (Aristotle's Poetics, ed. Colin Hardie (London, 1956), delivered in 1952-3, commented upon this tiresome phrase: "The phrase 'tragic flaw' should be treated with suspicion. I do not know when it was first used, or by whom. It is not an Aristotelian metaphor at all, and though it might be adopted as an accepted technical translation of 'hamartia' in the strict and properly limited sense, the fact is that it has not been adopted, and it is far more commonly used for a characteristic moral failing in an otherwise predominantly good man. Thus, it may be said by some writers to be the 'tragic flaw' of Oedipus that he was hasty in temper; of Samson that he was sensually uxorious; of Macbeth that he was ambitious; of Othello that he was proud and jealous - and so on ... but these things do not constitute the 'hamartia' of those characters in Aristotle's sense."

Mr. House goes on to urge that 'all serious modern Aristotelian scholarship agrees ... that 'hamartia' means an error which is derived from ignorance of some material fact or circumstance, and he refers to Bywater and Rostagni in support of his view. But although 'all serious modern scholarship' may have agreed to this point in 1952-3, in 1960 the good news has not yet reached the recesses of the land and many young students of literature are still apparently instructed in the theory of the 'tragic flaw; a theory which appears at first sight to be a most convenient device for analyzing tragedy but which leads the unfortunate user of it into a quicksand of absurdities in which he rapidly sinks, dragging the tragedies down with him.

In his edition of Aristotle on the Art of Poetry (Oxford, 1909), Ingram Bywater refers to such a misreading, though without using the term 'tragic flaw': "Hamartia in the Aristotelian sense of the term is a mistake or error of judgement (error in Lat.), and the deed done in consequence of it is an erratum. In the Ethics an erratum is said to originate not in vice or depravity but in ignorance of some material fact or circumstance ... this ignorance, we are told in another passage, takes the deed out of the class of voluntary acts, and enables one to forgive or even pity the doer."

The meaning of the Greek word is closer to "mistake" than to "flaw," "a wrong step blindly taken", "the missing of mark", and it is best interpreted in the context of what Aristotle has to say about plot and "the law or probability or necessity." In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist

will mistakenly bring about his own downfall-not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because he does not know enough. The role of the hamartia in tragedy comes not from its moral status but from the inevitability of its consequences. Both Butcher and Bywater agree that hamartia is not a moral failing. This error of judgment may arise from:

1. ignorance (Oedipus),
2. hasty - careless view (Othello)
3. decision taken voluntarily but not deliberately (Lear, Hamlet).

The error of judgement is derived from ignorance of some material fact or circumstance. Hamartia is accompanied by moral imperfections (Oedipus, Macbeth). Hence the peripeteia is really one or more self-destructive actions taken in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended (often termed tragic irony), and the anagnorisis is the gaining of the essential knowledge that was previously lacking. Butcher is of the view that, "Oedipus the king - includes all three meanings of hamartia, which in English cannot be termed by a single term.... Othello is the modern example, Oedipus in the ancient, are the two most conspicuous examples of ruin wrought by characters, noble, indeed, but not without defects, acting in the dark and, as it seemed, for the best."

Hamartia in Modern plays: Hamartia is practically removed from the hero and he becomes a victim of circumstance - a mere puppet. The villain in Greek plays was destiny, now its circumstances. The hero was powerful, he struggled but at the end of the day, death is inevitable. Modern heroes, dies several deaths - passive - not the doer of the action but receiver. The concept of heroic figures in tragedy has now become practically out of date. It was appropriate to the ages when men of noble birth and eminent positions were viewed as the representative figures of society. Today, common men are representative of society and life.

### **3.4 Major Themes**

#### **Cathartic Reversal**

Aristotle argues that the best tragedies - and thus the best plays, since Aristotle considers tragedy to be the highest dramatic form - use reversal and recognition to achieve catharsis. He writes that reversal works with a story's spine or center to ensure that the hero comes full circle. Oedipus is his exemplar of a hero who undergoes such a reversal and thus has cathartic self-recognition. Aristotle considers catharsis to be a form of redemption. For instance, even though Oedipus' recognition is tragic it still redeems him: he is no longer living in ignorance of his tragedy but instead has accepted fate.

And redemption is not the only result of catharsis; the audience too undergoes a catharsis of sorts in a good drama. The hero's catharsis induces both pity and fear in the audience: pity for the hero, and fear that his fate could happen to us.

#### **Complication and Denouement**

There are only two parts to a good drama, says Aristotle - the rising action leading to the climax, which is known as the complication, and the denouement, or the 'unraveling' that follows the climax. This twofold movement follows Aristotle's theory of poetic unity. The complication leads up to the revelation of the unity at the heart of the work. After this revelation, a play naturally turns to the denouement, in which the significance and ramifications of the unity are explored and resolved.

#### **The Imitative Nature of Art**

There are two common ways to think of art: some consider it to be an expression of what is original and unusual in human thinking; Aristotle, on the other hand, argues that that art is

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'imitative,' that is to say, representative of life. This imitative quality fascinates Aristotle. He devotes much of the Poetics to exploring the methods, significance, and consequences of this imitation of life. Aristotle concludes that art's imitative tendencies are expressed in one of three ways: a poet attempts to portray our world as it is, as we think it is, or as it ought to be.

### The Standard of Poetic Judgment

Aristotle thinks that this tendency to criticize a work of art for factual errors - such as lack of historical accuracy - is misguided. He believes that instead we should judge work according to its success at imitating the world. If the imitation is carried out with integrity and if the artwork's 'unity' is intact at its conclusion, a simple error in accuracy will do little to blemish this greater success. Art, in other words, should be judged aesthetically, not scientifically.

### Tragedy vs. Epic Poetry

In Aristotle's time, the critics considered epic poetry to be the supreme art form, but to Aristotle, tragedy is the better of the two forms. Aristotle believes that tragedy, like the epic, can entertain and edify in its written form, but also has the added dimension of being able to translate on stage into a drama of spectacle and music, capable of being digested in one sitting.

### Tragic Hero

The tragic hero, in Aristotle's view of drama, is not an eminently 'good' man; nor is he necessarily a paragon of virtue that is felled by adversity. Instead, the hero has some 'frailty' or flaw that is evident from the outset of a play that eventually ensures his doom. The audience, moreover, must be able to identify with this tragic flaw.

### The Unity of Poetry

Aristotle often speaks of the unity of poetry in the Poetics; what he means by "unity," however, is sometimes misunderstood. Unity refers to the ability of the best dramatic plots to revolve around a central axis that 'unites' all the action. Aristotle believes that a unified drama will have a 'spine': a central idea which motivates all the action, character, thoughts, diction and spectacle in the play.

### Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) Read the definition of Tragedy find which of the following lines substantiate the theory of catharsis.
  - (a) an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude
  - (b) several kinds being found in separate parts of the play
  - (c) in the form of action, not of narrative
  - (d) through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions
- (ii) The book Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics throws illuminating light on the theory of catharsis? Who is the writer of this book?
  - (a) F.L.Lucas
  - (b) W. Macniece Dixon
  - (c) Ingram Bywater
  - (d) S.H.Butcher
- (iii) According to F.L.Lucas, the concept of Catharsis is better translated as:
  - (a) Purgation
  - (b) Purification
  - (c) Moderation or tempering

- (iv) Tragic beauty and tragic delight which tragedy evokes constitutes the aesthetics of balance as propounded for the first time by Aristotle in his theory of Catharsis.
- (a) True (b) False  
(c) Cannot say
- (v) Hamartia in the Aristotelian sense of the term is a mistake or error of judgement and the deed done in consequence of it is an erratum.
- (a) True (b) False  
(c) Cannot say
- (vi) Othello is the Greek example, Oedipus in the renaissance, are the two most conspicuous examples of ruin wrought by characters, noble, indeed, but not without defects, acting in the dark and, as it seemed, for the best.
- (a) True (b) False  
(c) Cannot say

### 3.5 Summary

- Aristotle's conception of *Catharsis* is mainly intellectual. It is neither didactic nor theological, though it may have a residual theological element, as tragedy had its basis in religious ritual. Aristotle's *Catharsis* is not a mortal doctrine requiring the tragic poet to show that bad men come to bad ends, nor a kind of theological relief arising from the discovery that God's laws operate invisibly to make all things (even suffering) work out for the best. In the Church Mass, a part of the pleasure arises from learning, but much of it is the result of transcendental causes which cannot be explained in rational terms. Some of the ritual experience of the Catholic Mass is duplicated in the experience of tragedy, and hence cannot be explained in rational terms. *The tragic pleasure is, "no doubt, the pleasure of learning, but there is also, no doubt, that learning does not explain the whole thing. There are many confections of the experience which are not covered by Aristotle's treatment and which cannot be rationally explained. But the clarification theory comes closer to defining the essential quality of the tragic experience than didactic and theological explanations."*
- The various events must have logical unity ; they must also have another unity, i.e. the unity which results from the aim or purpose of the dramatist, that of arousing the tragic emotions.
- Plots may be fatal or fortunate. For tragedy, fatal plots are the best.
- Simple plots, and plots in which the dramatist has failed in properly linking up the various episodes, are rated very low by Aristotle.
- Complex plots are the best, for they are characterised by the element of surprise. They have Peripeteia and Anagnorisis.
- In the end, Aristotle advises tragic dramatists to take great care of their denouements, of the resolution of complications. Poetic Justice is not necessary, and there should be no double-ending.

### 3.6 Key-Words

1. Nemesis ("retribution") : The inevitable punishment or cosmic payback for acts of hubris.
2. Peripeteia ("plot reversal") : A pivotal or crucial action on the part of the protagonist that changes his situation from seemingly secure to vulnerable.

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### 3.7 Review Questions

1. What are the various interpretations given to the meaning of Catharsis?
2. How far is Aristotle's views of Hamartia true? Discuss.
3. How far Catharsis is relevant today?
4. Write a short note on Catharsis and Hamartia.

#### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (d)                      (ii) (a)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (a)                      (v) (a)  
(iv) (b)

### 3.8 Further Readings



*Books*

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## Unit 4: Aristotle: The Poetics: Ideal Tragic Hero, Comedy

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Greek Theory of Tragedy.
- Explain the Ideal Tragic Hero.

### Introduction

Aristotle established his view of what makes a tragic hero in his Book Poetics. Aristotle suggests that a hero of a tragedy must evoke in the audience a sense of pity or fear, saying, "the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity." He establishes the concept that the emotion of pity stems not from a person becoming better but when a person receives undeserved misfortune and fear comes when the misfortune befalls a man like us. This is why Aristotle points out the simple fact that, "The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad." Aristotle also establishes that the hero has to be "virtuous" that is to say he has to be "a morally blameless man". The Hero's flaw is what will bring him success but death by the end of the work.

Aristotle contests that the tragic hero has to be a man "who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty." He is not making the hero entirely good in which he can do no wrong but rather has the hero committing an injury or a great wrong leading to his misfortune. Aristotle is not contradicting himself saying that the hero has to be virtuous and yet not eminently good. Being eminently good is a moral specification to the fact that he is virtuous. He still has to be to some degree good. Aristotle adds another qualification to that of being virtuous but not entirely good when he says, "He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous." He goes on to give examples such as Oedipus and Thyestes."

A tragic hero is the main character (or "protagonist") in a tragedy. Tragic heroes appear in the dramatic works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, Marston, Corneille, Racine, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Strindberg, and many other writers.

A tragic hero is one that has one major flaw and the audience usually feels pity.



## **4.1 Greek Theory of Tragedy: Aristotle's Poetics**

The classic discussion of Greek tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*. He defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself." He continues, "Tragedy is a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear. Its action should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune, involving persons renowned and of superior attainments, and it should be written in poetry embellished with every kind of artistic expression." The writer presents "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to interpret its catharsis of such of such emotions" (by catharsis, Aristotle means a purging or sweeping away of the pity and fear aroused by the tragic action).

The basic difference Aristotle draws between tragedy and other genres, such as comedy and the epic, is the "tragic pleasure of pity and fear" the audience feel watching a tragedy. In order for the tragic hero to arouse these feelings in the audience, he cannot be either all good or all evil but must be someone the audience can identify with; however, if he is superior in some way(s), the tragic pleasure is intensified. His disastrous end results from a mistaken action, which in turn arises from a tragic flaw or from a tragic error in judgment. Often the tragic flaw is hubris, an excessive pride that causes the hero to ignore a divine warning or to break a moral law. It has been suggested that because the tragic hero's suffering is greater than his offense, the audience feels pity; because the audience members perceive that they could behave similarly, they feel pity.

### **4.1.1 The Tragic Hero**

The tragic play comes from Greece; the genre was established by the fifth century BCE. Plays were performed during an Athenian festival, the City Dionysia, and actors evoked the heroic figures of myth and legend. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle said that tragedy is an imitation of 'events terrible and pitiful'. The tragic hero, said Aristotle, should not be 'a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us'. Neither should he be 'a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear'. Finally, Aristotle cautions, 'Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves'. Aristotle pronounces the hero of tragedy properly to be 'the character between these two extremes - that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous - a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families'.

The *Poetics*, along with the tragedies of the Roman playwright Seneca, were influential in the Elizabethan period. Shakespeare's tragic heroes conform to many of the precepts of Aristotle. They may have royal blood, be renowned military leaders, or both. They may exhibit villainy, but this is not usually the villainy of an out-and-out tyrant, but the result of a tragic flaw in character that leads them to commit errors or acts of violence. Thus, Hamlet's melancholy and inner torment, although partly induced by circumstances, also seem to be part of his own character. Othello's jealousy and failure to recognise Iago's manipulation result in the murder of Desdemona. Antony's excessive love for Cleopatra weakens him, and Lear's pride and rejection of Cordelia bring about his madness and death. As Aristotle suggested, characters who are flawed, rather than wholly villainous, are characters with whom the audience can identify. Seneca's tragic heroes tend to be more extreme, consciously doing wrong and driven by wild passions. Perhaps another aspect of the audience's ability to identify came because Shakespeare varied the classical pattern by including comic elements. For example, much of Hamlet's dialogue is blackly comic.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are often victims of their own excesses or self-deception. Although they may be prey to manipulative characters, like Iago in *Othello* or Goneril and Regan in *Lear*, some lack of understanding prevents them from seeing the truth. Othello woos Desdemona with

charm and the use of storytelling, yet is unable to discern Iago's use of similar techniques, so that he swallows Iago's stories whole. Perhaps one aspect of these heroes' struggle with self-understanding is that they suffer from inner conflict: Hamlet is torn between the desire for revenge and a sense of the futility of life and action, Othello is tormented by the gap between Iago's lies and what he knows Desdemona to be, Antony hesitates between Egypt, where his passions lie, and Rome, seat of his military responsibilities, and Lear's incompatible desires for absolute power and genuine affection push him from order and control into chaos and madness.

To some extent, the heroes all display the flaw of hubris, or overweening pride. Othello believes he has the right to dispose of Desdemona, and Hamlet serenely dispatches Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Antony places his romantic life above the fate of nations, and Lear believes that human affection is his to arrogate, and that he has control over his domain, which he ends by ceding to France. Despite the heroes' inevitable downfall, Shakespeare emphasises that they are noble to the end: Cassio calls Othello 'great of heart', Caesar says of the grave of Antony and Cleopatra that 'No grave upon the earth shall clip in it/ A pair so famous', and Fortinbras speaks an epitaph on Hamlet: 'Let four captains/ Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,/ For he was likely, had he been put on,/ To have proved most royal. And for his passage/ The soldiers' music and the rite of war/ Speak loudly for him'. Shakespearean tragedies end with a poignant sense of what might have been if the hero had been able to overcome his circumstances and his tragic flaw.

## 4.2 Comedy

According to Aristotle (who speculates on the matter in his *Poetics*), ancient comedy originated with the komos, a curious and improbable spectacle in which a company of festive males apparently sang, danced, and cavorted rollickingly around the image of a large phallus. (If this theory is true, by the way, it gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "stand-up routine.")

Accurate or not, the linking of the origins of comedy to some sort of phallic ritual or festival of mirth seems both plausible and appropriate, since for most of its history—from Aristophanes to Seinfeld—comedy has involved a high-spirited celebration of human sexuality and the triumph of eros. As a rule, tragedies occur on the battlefield or in a palace's great hall; a more likely setting for comedy is the bedroom or bathroom.

On the other hand, it's not true that a film or literary work must involve sexual humor or even be funny in order to qualify as a comedy. A happy ending is all that's required. In fact, since at least as far back as Aristotle, the basic formula for comedy has had more to do with conventions and expectations of plot and character than with a requirement for lewd jokes or cartoonish pratfalls. In essence: A comedy is a story of the rise in fortune of a sympathetic central character.

### 4.2.1 The Comic Hero

Of course this definition doesn't mean that the main character in a comedy has to be a spotless hero in the classic sense. It only means that she (or he) must display at least the minimal level of personal charm or worth of character it takes to win the audience's basic approval and support. The rise of a completely worthless person or the triumph of an utter villain is not comical; it's the stuff of gothic fable or dark satire. On the other hand, judging from the qualities displayed by many of literature's most popular comic heroes (e.g., Falstaff, Huck Finn) audiences have no trouble at all pulling for a likeable rogue or fun-loving scamp.

Aristotle suggests that comic figures are mainly "average to below average" in terms of moral character, perhaps having in mind the wily servant or witty knave who was already a stock character of ancient comedy. He also suggests that only low or ignoble figures can strike us as ridiculous. However, the most ridiculous characters are often those who, although well-born, are merely pompous or self-important instead of truly noble. Similarly, the most sympathetic comic figures are frequently plucky underdogs, young men or women from humble or disadvantaged backgrounds who prove their real worth—in effect their "natural nobility"—through various tests of character over the course of a story or play.

### **4.3 The Ideal Tragic Hero**

Aristotle first lays down the general rule that characters in a tragedy should be “good” or, if possible, ‘better’ than the ‘good’. Like the painter, the dramatist sketches his characters to that the quality of ‘goodness’ shines out more clearly than in life. Then he proceeds to examine the qualities which the ideal tragic hero must have. No passage in *the Poetics*, with the exception of the *Catharsis* phrase, has attracted so much critical attention as his ideal of the tragic hero.

#### **Not an Utter Villain**

The function of a tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, and Aristotle deduces the qualities of his hero from this function. He should be good, but not too good or perfect, for the fall of a perfectly good man from happiness into misery, would be odious and repellent. His fall will not arouse pity, for he is not like us and his undeserved fall would only shock and disgust. Similarly, the spectacle of an utterly wicked person passing from happiness to misery may satisfy our moral sense, but is lacking in the proper tragic qualities. Such a person is not like us, and his fall is felt to be well-deserved and in accordance with the requirements of ‘justice’. It excites neither pity nor fear. Thus according to Aristotle, perfectly good, as well as utterly wicked persons, are not suitable to be heroes of tragedies. However, Elizabethan tragedy has demonstrated that, given the necessary skill and art, even villains, like Macbeth, can serve as proper tragic heroes and their fall can arouse the specific tragic emotions. “There is, no doubt, that there is something terrible and sublime in mere will-power working its evil way, dominating its surroundings with the superhuman energy” (**Butcher**). The wreck of such power excites in us a certain tragic sympathy: we experience a sense of loss and regret over the waste or misuse of gifts so splendid.

#### **Not Perfectly Good or Saintly**

Similarly, according to Aristotelian canon, a saint – a character perfectly good – would be unsuitable as a tragic hero. He is on the side of the moral order and not opposed to it, and hence his fall shocks and repels. Moreover, his martyrdom is a spiritual victory and the sense of his moral triumph drowns the feeling of pity for his physical suffering. The saint is self-effacing and unselfish, and so he tends to be passive and inactive. Drama, on the other hand, requires for its effectiveness a militant and combative hero. However, in quite recent times, both Bernard Shaw and T.S. Eliot have achieved outstanding success with saints as their tragic heroes. In this connection, it would be pertinent to remember first, that Aristotle’s conclusions are based on the Greek drama with which he was familiar, and secondly, that he is laying down the qualifications of an ideal tragic hero; he is here discussing what is the very best, and not what is good. On the whole, his views are justified, for it requires the genius of a Shakespeare to arouse sympathy for an utter villain, and saints as successful tragic heroes have been extremely rare.

#### **An Intermediate Sort of Person**

Having rejected perfection as well as utter depravity and villainy, Aristotle points out that *the ideal tragic hero*, “*must be an intermediate kind of person, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment.*” The ideal tragic hero is a man who stands midway between the two extremes. He is not eminently good or just, though he inclines to the side of goodness. He is like us, but as **Butcher** points out, raised above the ordinary level by a deeper vein of feeling, or heightened powers of intellect or will. He is idealised, but still he has so much of common humanity as to enlist our interest and sympathy.

#### **“Hamartia” : Various Interpretations**

The tragic hero is not depraved or vicious, but he is also not perfect, and his misfortune is brought upon him by some fault of his own. The Greek word used here is, “*hamartia*”. The root meaning of *Hamartia* is, “*missing the mark*”. He falls not because of the act of some outside agency or vice or

depravity, but because of *Hamartia* or “miscalculation” on his part. *Hamartia* is not a moral failing, and hence it is unfortunate that it has been translated rather loosely as, “tragic flaw” as has been done by **Bradley**. Aristotle himself distinguishes *hamartia* from moral failing, and makes it quite clear that he means by it some error of judgment. He writes that the cause of the hero’s fall must lie, “not in depravity, but in some error or *Hamartia* on his part.” **Butcher, Bywater and Rostangi**, all agree that “*Hamartia*” is not a moral state; but an error of judgment which a man makes or commits. However, as **Humphrey House** tells us, Aristotle does not assert or deny anything about the connection of *hamartia* with moral failings in the hero. “*It may be accompanied by normal imperfection, but it is not itself a moral imperfection, and in the purest tragic situation the suffering hero is not morally to blame.*”

### Hamartia : Its Three Sources

Thus *Hamartia* is an error or miscalculation, but the error may arise in three ways. It may arise from “ignorance of some material fact or circumstance”, or secondly, it may be an error arising from hasty or careless view of the special case, or, thirdly, it may be an error voluntary, but not deliberate, as in the case of acts committed in anger or passion. **Else** and **Martin Ostwald**, both critics of eminence, interpret *Hamartia* actively and say that the hero has a tendency to err, created by lack of knowledge, and he may commit a series of errors. They further say that the tendency to err characterises the hero from the beginning – (it is a character-trait) – and that at the crisis of the play, it is complemented by the recognition scene (*Anagnorisis*), which is a sudden change, “from ignorance to knowledge”.

### Hamartia : Its Real Meaning and Significance

As a matter of fact, *Hamartia* is a word which admits of various shades of meaning, and hence it has been differently inter-pret-ed by different critics. However, all serious modern Aristotelian scholarship is agreed that *Hamartia* is not moral imperfection – though it may be allied with moral faults – that it is an error of judgment, whether arising from ignorance of some material circumstance, or from rashness and impulsiveness of temper, or from some passion. It may even be a character-trait, for the hero may have a tendency to commit errors of judgment, and may commit not one, but a series of errors. This last conclusion is borne out by the play *Oedipus Tyrannus* to which Aristotle refers again and again, and which may be taken to be his ideal. In this play, the life of the hero is a chain of errors, the most fatal of all being his marriage with his mother. If King Oedipus is Aristotle’s ideal hero, we can say with **Butcher** that, “*his conception of Hamartia includes all the three meanings mentioned above, which in English cannot be covered by a single term.*” *Hamartia* is an error, or a series of errors, “Whether morally culpable or not,” committed by an otherwise noble person, and these errors derive him to his doom. The tragic irony lies in the fact that hero may err innocently, unknowingly, without any evil intention at all, yet he is doomed no less than those who are depraved and sin consciously. He has *hamartia*, he commits error or errors, and as a result his very virtues hurry him to his ruin. Says **Butcher**, “Othello in the modern drama, Oedipus in the ancient, are the two most conspicuous examples of ruin wrought by characters, noble, indeed, but not without defects, acting in the dark and, as it seemed, for the best.”

### The Ideal Hero : His Eminence

Aristotle lays down another qualification for the tragic hero. He must be, “of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity”. In other words, he must be a person who occupies a position of lofty eminence in society. He must be a highly placed individual, well reputed. This is so because Greek tragedy, with which alone Aristotle was familiar, was written about a few distinguished, royal families. Aristotle, basing his qualification of the tragic hero on what he was familiar with, considers eminence as essential for the tragic hero. Modern drama, however, has demonstrated that the meanest individual can serve as a tragic hero as well as a prince of the blood royal, and that tragedies of Sophoclean grandeur can be enacted even in remote country solitudes.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) On which three grounds did Plato objected to poetry?
  - (a) Educational, philosophical and moral
  - (b) Sexuality, morality and philosophical
  - (c) Educational, obscenity and sexuality
- (ii) According to Plato, poets are breeders of ..... and poetry is ..... of lies.
  - (a) Falsehood and mother
  - (b) Truth and mother
  - (c) Falsehood and sister.
- (iii) Aristotle's well-known treatises are:
  - (a) Dialogues
  - (b) Poetics and Rhetoric
  - (c) Poetry and drama
  - (d) Tragedy and epic
- (iv) Plato wrote his treatise in form of:
  - (a) dialogues
  - (b) pauaguaphs
  - (c) Poetry
  - (d) story telling
- (v) According to Plato, poetry is better than philosophy:
  - (a) True
  - (b) False
  - (c) Cannot say

### 4.4 Summary

- In essence, tragedy is the mirror image or negative of comedy. For instead of depicting the rise in circumstances of a dejected or outcast underdog, tragedy shows us the downfall of a once prominent and powerful hero. Like comedy, tragedy also supposedly originated as part of a religious ritual--in this case a Dionysian ceremony with dancers dressed as goats or animals (hence tragoedia, literally a "goat-song) pantomiming the suffering or death-rebirth of a god or hero.
- Once again, the most influential theorist of the genre is Aristotle, whose Poetics has guided the composition and critical interpretation of tragedy for more than two millenia. Distilling the many penetrating remarks contained in this commentary, we can derive the following general definition: Tragedy depicts the downfall of a basically good person through some fatal error or misjudgment, producing suffering and insight on the part of the protagonist and arousing pity and fear on the part of the audience.
- To explain this definition further, we can state the following principles or general requirements for Aristotelian tragedy:
  - (i) A true tragedy should evoke pity and fear on the part of the audience. According to Aristotle, pity and fear are the natural human response to spectacles of pain and suffering--especially to the sort of suffering that can strike anybody at any time. Aristotle goes on to say that tragedy effects "the catharsis of these emotions"--in effect arousing pity and fear only to purge them, as when we exit a scary movie feeling relieved or exhilarated.
  - (ii) The tragic hero must be essentially admirable and good. As Aristotle points out, the fall of a scoundrel or villain evokes applause rather than pity. Audiences cheer when the bad guy goes down. On the other hand, the downfall of an essentially good person disturbs us and stirs our compassion. As a rule, the nobler and more truly admirable a person is, the greater will be our anxiety or grief at his or her downfall.
  - (iii) In a true tragedy, the hero's demise must come as a result of some personal error or decision. In other words, in Aristotle's view there is no such thing as an innocent victim of tragedy, nor can a genuinely tragic downfall ever be purely a matter of blind accident or bad luck. Instead, authentic tragedy must always be the product of some fatal choice or action, for the tragic hero must always bear at least some responsibility for his own doom.



- However, Aristotle's dictum is quite justified on the principle that, "higher the state, the greater the fall that follow", or because heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes, while the death of a beggar passes unnoticed. But it should be remembered that Aristotle nowhere says that the hero should be a king or at least royally descended. As in order matters, so in his this respect also, they were the Renaissance critics who distorted Aristotle and made the qualification more rigid and narrow.

#### 4.5 Key-Words

1. Anagnorisis ("tragic recognition or insight") : According to Aristotle, a moment of clairvoyant insight or understanding in the mind of the tragic hero as he suddenly comprehends the web of fate that he has entangled himself in.
2. Hamartia ("tragic error") : A fatal error or simple mistake on the part of the protagonist that eventually leads to the final catastrophe. A metaphor from archery, hamartia literally refers to a shot that misses the bullseye. Hence it need not be an egregious "fatal flaw" (as the term hamartia has traditionally been glossed). Instead, it can be something as basic and inescapable as a simple miscalculation or slip-up.
3. Hubris ("violent transgression") : The sin par excellence of the tragic or over-ambitious hero. Though it is usually translated as pride, hubris is probably better understood as a sort of insolent daring, a haughty overstepping of cultural codes or ethical boundaries.

#### 4.6 Review Questions

1. What is Aristotle's definition of Tragedy?
2. Discuss the poetics as an Ideal Tragic Hero.
3. Write a short note on:
  - (i) The Comic Hero
  - (ii) The Tragic Hero

#### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (a)                      (iii) (b)                      (iv) (a)                      (v) (b)

#### 4.7 Further Readings



Books

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## Unit 5: Is There a Text in This Class – Introduction to Stanley Fish

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Stanley Fish.
- Discuss major works of Stanley Fish.
- Understand Criticisms of Stanley's Work.

### Introduction

Stanley Fish is one of America's most stimulating literary theorists. In this book, he undertakes a profound reexamination of some of criticism's most basic assumptions. He penetrates to the core of the modern debate about interpretation, explodes numerous misleading formulations, and offers a stunning proposal for a new way of thinking about the way we read.

Fish begins by examining the relation between a reader and a text, arguing against the formalist belief that the text alone is the basic, knowable, neutral, and unchanging component of literary experience. But in arguing for the right of the reader to interpret and in effect create the literary work, he skillfully avoids the old trap of subjectivity. To claim that each reader essentially participates in the making of a poem or novel is not, he shows, an invitation to unchecked subjectivity and to the endless proliferation of competing interpretations. For each reader approaches a literary work not as an isolated individual but as part of a community of readers. "Indeed," he writes, "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings."

### 5.1 An Overview

A provocative literary theorist and intellectual gadfly, Stanley Fish has earned distinction for his investigations into the subjectivity of textual interpretation, specifically his explication of the concept of an "interpretive community." While in the first major portion of his publishing career Fish explored the role of the reader in determining the meaning of a text (as seen through the lens of seventeenth-century English literature), he later applied his particular brand of literary theory to legal studies. He has also critiqued the work of his own colleagues, questioning the tendency of academics in English literature to politicize their writings. Fish is known, if not always appreciated, by his peers for his controversial stances.

## 5.2 Biographical Information

Fish was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on April 19, 1938. His family moved to Philadelphia, where he attended the University of Pennsylvania and received his B.A. in 1959. Upon graduating from college, he married Adrienne A. Aaron, with whom he had a daughter; Fish and Aaron divorced in 1980. He attended graduate school at Yale, earning his Ph.D., with a thesis on the English poet John Skelton, in 1962. While at Berkeley Fish released his first book, *John Skelton's Poetry* (1965), as well as subsequent volumes that established his critical reputation. In 1974 Fish moved to Johns Hopkins University, where he was named Kenan Professor of English. During this period, he married his second wife, Jane Parry Tompkins, also a professor, in 1982. Fish began working at Duke University in 1985, where he served as Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of English and Law, chair of the English department, associate vice provost, and executive director of Duke University Press. Since 1999 he has held the position of dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



*Did u know?* Fish's first teaching job was at the University of California at Berkeley, where he received incremental promotions from the position of instructor, beginning in 1962, to that of professor of English in 1969.

## 5.3 Major Works

Beginning his career with strictly academic subjects, Fish's writings came to include concerns outside of the classroom. His first book, *John Skelton's Poetry*, which grew out of his doctoral thesis, takes a radical perspective in interpreting Skelton's work. Fish contends that Skelton was basically a private poet and that his implicitly Christian verse serves as a record of the poet's religious development; at the center of Fish's argument is the "psychological (spiritual) history" of what he refers to as the "protagonist." In his next book, *Surprised by Sin* (1967), Fish daringly argues that the subject of John Milton's masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, is actually the reader. Fish attempts to show that the text of the poem, controlled by its author's didactic goals, uses different techniques involving form and theme to call attention to the reader's interpretive inadequacies; the reader's deficiencies are pointed out by the poem, making the reader open to being educated as to "the ways of God to men." *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972) presents a more direct confrontation of the matter of form within a text. In this book Fish identifies two types of literature: rhetorical, which confirms and reinforces the author's position, therefore affirming the reader's expectations and "self-esteem"; and dialectical, which undermines, or "consumes," the reader's self-esteem by challenging assumptions and subverting expectations.

Fish contends that seventeenth-century writers such as John Donne, George Herbert, John Bunyan, and Milton construct texts that are consumed under their own authority—thereby winning Fish's favor. In *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), Fish continues to explore the idea of reader-as-subject. This collection of essays provides a broader statement of the author's notion that the reader, instead of merely discovering the meaning of a text, actually determines it. The author also calls into question the credibility of facts, maintaining that what are considered facts actually rely on certain assumptions within particular institutions. Facts thus depend upon the agreement of the members of an institution; if the nature of the institution is questioned, then the facts embraced by that institution can also be called into doubt. *Is There a Text in This Class?* emphasizes the role of an "interpretive community," whereby meaning is attributed to a text through readers who, as members of such a group, share certain "interpretive assumptions." *Doing What Comes Naturally* (1989) broadens the scope of the author's work in literary criticism to include legal studies. In this collection of essays, Fish examines the relation of theory to practice, the connection between meaning and context, and the influence of rhetoric on argument. In *There's No Such Thing as Free*

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Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too (1994), Fish argues that free speech cannot be separated from partisan politics and therefore scorns liberals who believe in the possibility of neutrality. Fish's interest in politics continued with Professional Correctness (1995), in which he criticizes academics for investing their scholarly writings with political meaning, and The Trouble with Principle (1999), in which he uses, among other examples, the debate over affirmative action to assert that an emphasis on principles impedes democracy.


### 5.4 Criticisms of Stanley's Work

As a frequent contributor to the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal editorial page, Fish has been the target of wide-ranging criticism.

To Fish, "ideas have no consequences." For taking this stance, Shulevitz characterizes Fish as "not the unprincipled relativist he's accused of being. He's something worse. He's a fatalist."

Likewise, among academics, Fish has endured vigorous criticism. The conservative R. V. Young writes, "Because his general understanding of human nature and of the human condition is false, Fish fails in the specific task of a university scholar, which requires that learning be placed in the service of truth. And this, finally, is the critical issue in the contemporary university of which Stanley Fish is a typical representative: sophistry renders truth itself equivocal and deprives scholarly learning of its reason for being. . . . His brash disdain of principle and his embrace of sophistry reveal the hollowness hidden at the heart of the current academic enterprise."

Terry Eagleton, a prominent British Marxist, excoriates Fish's "discreditable epistemology" as "sinister." According to Eagleton, "Like almost all diatribes against universalism, Fish's critique of universalism has its own rigid universals: the priority at all times and places of sectoral interests, the permanence of conflict, the a priori status of belief systems, the rhetorical character of truth, the fact that all apparent openness is secretly closure, and the like." Hence, it is inherently self-defeating. Of Fish's attempt to co-opt the critiques leveled against him, Eagleton responds, "The felicitous upshot is that nobody can ever criticise Fish, since if their criticisms are intelligible to him, they belong to his cultural game and are thus not really criticisms at all; and if they are not intelligible, they belong to some other set of conventions entirely and are therefore irrelevant."



*Notes* Writing in Slate Magazine, Judith Shulevitz reported that not only does Fish openly proclaim himself "unprincipled" but also rejects wholesale the concepts of "fairness, impartiality, reasonableness."

In her essay "Sophistry about Conventions," philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that Stanley Fish's theoretical views are based on "extreme relativism and even radical subjectivism." Discounting his work as nothing more than sophistry, Nussbaum claims that Fish "relies on the regulative principle of non-contradiction in order to adjudicate between competing principles," thereby relying on normative standards of argumentation even as he argues against them. Offering an alternative, Nussbaum cites John Rawls's work in A Theory of Justice to highlight "an example of a rational argument; it can be said to yield, in a perfectly recognizable sense, ethical truth." Nussbaum appropriates Rawls's critique of the insufficiencies of Utilitarianism, showing that a rational person will consistently prefer a system of justice that acknowledges boundaries between separate persons rather than relying on the aggregation of the sum total of desires. "This," she claims, "is all together different from rhetorical manipulation."

Camille Paglia, author of Sexual Personae and public intellectual, denounced Fish as a "totalitarian Tinkerbell," charging him with hypocrisy for lecturing about multiculturalism from the perspective of a tenured professor at the homogeneous and sheltered ivory tower of Duke.

David Hirsch, a prominent critic of post-structuralist influences on hermeneutics, censured Fish for "lapses in logical rigor" and "carelessness toward rhetorical precision." In an examination of Fish's arguments, Hirsch attempts to demonstrate that "not only was a restoration of New Critical methods unnecessary, but that Fish himself had not managed to rid himself of the shackles of New Critical theory." Hirsch compares Fish's work to Penelope's loom in the *Odyssey*, stating, "what one critic weaves by day, another unweaves by night." "Nor," he writes, "does this weaving and unweaving constitute a dialectic, since no forward movement takes place." Ultimately, Hirsch sees Fish as left to "wander in his own Elysian fields, hopelessly alienated from art, from truth, and from humanity."

### Intent of Author

It is in this same manner that Fish dismisses the idea of authorial intent as the guiding principle in interpretation. In analyzing one of his previous critical works he declares, I did what critics always do: I "saw" what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention. . . . What I am suggesting is that formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear; they are not "in" the text, and I would make the same argument for intentions. To claim that the author intended to say or do such and such is really a declaration regarding the interpreter, in Fish's theory. Thus different interpreters will see different intentions because they are a creation of the reader and not the author. As with New Critical theory, the author fails to live past the creation of the text, indeed, for Fish the author as well is a creation of the reader.

Fish can make this move because of his epistemic beliefs that nothing we see, perceive, or think is uninterpreted. He considers the attempt to access the author's intention as naive; for how would one ever access an intention as it does not exist in any objective or uninterpreted realm that can be mediated to our consciousness without itself being interpreted? We could have access to documents regarding the author's true intention, "but the documents . . . that would give us that intention are no more available to a literal reading (are no more uninterpreted) than the literal reading it would yield." Thus when John writes, "These things have been written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that believing you may have eternal life in his name," we are no closer to his intentions than were he to have said and written nothing.

Fish is following after the New Critical school, which as we have seen, disregarded authorial intent as well as historical interpretation. For Fish it is not important to access the original context in order to access meaning. He says, "to consult dictionaries, grammars, and histories is to assume that meanings can be specified independently of the activity of reading." But as we have seen it is the activity of reading which takes center stage in the making of meaning. Fish posits this because he believes that we as interpreters are cut off from past worlds or cultures. In other words, he believes that we are without commonality with past cultures and that, therefore, a complete disjunction exists. The interpreter belongs to a different world from the author.

### Interpretive Communities

What lies behind Fish's thinking at this point is a strong view of the social construction of reality. Fish firmly believes that knowledge is not objective but always socially conditioned. All that one thinks and "knows" is an interpretation that is only made possible by the social context in which one lives. For Fish the very thoughts one thinks are made possible by presuppositions of the community in which one lives and furthermore the socially conditioned individual, which all individuals are, cannot think beyond the limits made possible by the culture. This culture is referred to by Fish as an "interpretive community" and the strategies of an interpreter are community property, and insofar as they at once enable and limit the operations of his consciousness. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties.

Fish believes that interpretive communities, like languages, are purely conventional, that is, arbitrarily agreed upon constructions. The way a community lives is in no way a reflection of

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some higher reality, it is rather a construction, or edifice that has been erected by consensus. This holds true for the interpretive strategies a culture or an institution employs as well as their notions of right and wrong. A culture's morality is no more founded in any external reality than its language. Nor is it possible to specify how language correlates with the external world. Language and its usage are arbitrary decisions made by convention as is the fact that we call north "North" instead of something else.

In response to a criticism launched by M. H. Abrams, Fish explains some of his understanding of the conventional nature of language. If what follows is communication or understanding, it will not be because he and I share a language, in the sense of knowing the meanings of individual words and the rules for combining them, but because a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us, and implicates us in a world of already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values, and so on; and it is to the features of that world that any words we utter will be heard as necessarily referring.

Similarly, what we call literature is not such because of some abiding principle of truth or art that exists in an atemporal state, but it is such because the culture values it for interests of its own, that is because it reflects the culture's values and beliefs in some way.

Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.

In this view literature is simply the expression of an ideology. Because of his views on literature, literature tends to lose its "special status" as literature and becomes simply a reflection of communal values which is as subject to change as are cultures. That is not to say that the individual or culture consciously chooses its values, which would imply some form of objectivity or the ability to stand apart from one's values. To Fish it is not possible to abstract one's self from one's values. Fish is simply a product of his environment without the ability to choose his beliefs and values. They are instead informed or determined by the culture which is historically conditioned and no more able to choose objectively than the individual.

Using Fish as an example of post-structuralist critical theory, I will in the remaining chapters analyze his thought as it relates to post-modernism. What follows is an examination of post-modernism from the perspective of the discipline of philosophy, or an history of ideas approach. It is not intended to be a comprehensive history of Western philosophy but a brief examination of some of the salient features which I believe have contributed to the rise of what is now being called post-modernism. I will end the chapter with an emphasis on the "linguistic turn", as Rorty has called it, in philosophy of the twentieth century by examining some of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein as his thinking bears some similarities to that of Stanley Fish and lays some of the groundwork for the current state of things. Wittgenstein is important as his thinking is often characterized as thoroughly conventionalist and misappropriated as such.

In this Unit would also like to take a critical look at some of Fish's theory and examine some of the consequences of his thinking. Fish claims that because his thinking is theoretical it is without consequences (he consistently tells his critics "not to worry"). He is at least disingenuous if not patently dishonest in this assertion as his theories have grave consequence especially for those who would appeal to some transcendent standard.

In taking a critical stance toward Fish's literary theory I am well aware of Fish's response to those who disagree with his theories or, as he puts it, "feel threatened" by his ideas. Those who hold to the idea of essences, or to the reality and accessibility of transcendent truths, he labels as foundationalists, members of the "intellectual right. And he further accuses them of holding to a naive epistemology which views the mind as merely reflecting the world as it really is. Moreover

they are characterized as without understanding how fundamental language is to one's world view and the cultural assumptions that go with it. I must plead guilty to being a foundationalist with objections to Fish's theory. Fish claims that his theory, however, is internally coherent, while I will argue just the opposite, that his theory does not cohere based on his own assumptions. Fish's response to these criticisms would be to deny me as his critic access to his theory in the first place because I do not share his assumptions and, to him, only those who are within a community can understand its thought. That claim is, however, as we shall see, one of the bases of my criticism. Let us turn briefly to the history of philosophy.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Fish was born in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1938 | (b) 1935 |
| (c) 1940 | (d) 1945 |
- (ii) 'Is there a text in this Class' was published in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1988 | (b) 1975 |
| (c) 1980 | (d) 1982 |
- (iii) 'Sexual Personae' was written by ..... .
- |                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| (a) Camille Raglia  | (b) Stanley       |
| (c) Martha Nussbaum | (d) None of these |
- (iv) Fish began working at Duke University in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1985 | (b) 1980 |
| (c) 1981 | (d) 1975 |

### 5.5 Summary

- Stanley Fish is one of America's most stimulating literary theorists. In this book, he undertakes a profound reexamination of some of criticism's most basic assumptions. He penetrates to the core of the modern debate about interpretation, explodes numerous misleading formulations, and offers a stunning proposal for a new way of thinking about the way we read.
- Fish begins by examining the relation between a reader and a text, arguing against the formalist belief that the text alone is the basic, knowable, neutral, and unchanging component of literary experience. But in arguing for the right of the reader to interpret and in effect create the literary work, he skillfully avoids the old trap of subjectivity. To claim that each reader essentially participates in the making of a poem or novel is not, he shows, an invitation to unchecked subjectivity and to the endless proliferation of competing interpretations. For each reader approaches a literary work not as an isolated individual but as part of a community of readers. "Indeed," he writes, "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings."
- The book is developmental, not static. Fish at all times reveals the evolutionary aspect of his work--the manner in which he has assumed new positions, altered them, and then moved on. Previously published essays are introduced by headnotes which relate them to the central notion of interpretive communities as it emerges in the final chapters. In the course of refining his theory, Fish includes rather than excludes the thinking of other critics and shows how often they agree with him, even when he and they may appear to be most dramatically at odds. Engaging, lucid, provocative, this book will immediately find its place among the seminal works of modern literary criticism.



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**5.6 Key-Words**

- 1. Poststructuralism : Term used to describe those kinds of thinking and writing that disturb or exceed the 'merely' rational or scientific, self-assuredly 'systematic' work of structuralists. It is primarily associated with the work of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Cixous and (post-1967) Barthes. Poststructuralism entails a rigorous and, in principle, interminable questioning of every centrism (logocentrism, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, etc.), of all origins and ends, meaning and intention, paradigm or system.

**5.7 Review Questions**

- 1. Briefly explain the life of Stanley Fish.
- 2. Discuss Stanley Fish as a critic.
- 3. What is meant by Interpretive communities? Discuss.

**Answers: Self-Assessment**

- 1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (a)                      (iv) (a)

**5.8 Further Readings**



*Books*

- 1. Lodge, David and Nigel Woods (eds.) Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, 2nd edition, New Delhi: Pearson Education Ltd., 2005.
- 2. Guerin, Wilfred L. & et. al, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature, 5th edition, New Delhi: OUP, 2007.
- 3. Barry, Peter, Beginning Theory: An introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, 1st edition, Manchester: MUP, 2002.
- 4. Bloom, Harold et. al, Deconstruction and Criticism. London: Routledge, 1979.
- 5. Handy, William and Max Westbrook, (eds,) Twentieth Century Criticism, New York: Free Press, Macmillan, 1977.

## Unit 6: Is There a Text In This Class – Stanley Fish: Analysis

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Theory of Stanley Fish.
- Understand Stanley's 'is There Text in This Class'.

### Introduction

Stanley Eugene Fish is one of the chief proponents of a school of literary criticism known as reader response criticism. In fact, the school of reader response critics has even been referred to as the "School of Fish". As the name might suggest, reader response criticism emphasizes the role of the reader as crucial in determining the significance of a text. To a critic of this type, reading is seen as an activity which makes meaning in a text rather than a passive function which derives meaning from a text. In his book *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Fish has collected a number of his most important essays and articles in an attempt to chart the progress of his evolving interpretive method.

The book is developmental, not static. Fish at all times reveals the evolutionary aspect of his work—the manner in which he has assumed new positions, altered them, and then moved on. Previously published essays are introduced by headnotes which relate them to the central notion of interpretive communities as it emerges in the final chapters. In the course of refining his theory, Fish includes rather than excludes the thinking of other critics and shows how often they agree with him, even when he and they may appear to be most dramatically at odds. Engaging, lucid, provocative, this book will immediately find its place among the seminal works of modern literary criticism.

### 6.1 Literature in the Reader

In the essay "Literature in the Reader," Fish stresses the temporal nature of the reading experience as opposed to the spatial one proposed by other critics: ". . . it [the opposing school] transforms a temporal experience into a spatial one; it steps back and in a single glance takes in a whole (sentence, page, work) which the reader knows (if at all) only bit by bit, moment by moment". Fish finds the meaning of the work to reside in this bit by bit knowing, the experience that an "informed reader" has as he reads, rather than from anything imbedded in the actual text. In other words, the process of enchantment/disenchantment occurs continuously throughout the reading experience.

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Fish defines his "informed reader" as having the following qualities: "The informed reader is someone who (1) is a competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up; (2) is in full possession of 'the semantic knowledge that a mature . . . listener brings to his task of comprehension,' and (3) has literary competence".


This emphasis on the importance of the reader in the creation of meaning in texts raises objections among the formalists, among them William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.

The Verbal Icon(1954) contains the following passage:

The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does) . . . It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome . . . is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.

Fish answers this by saying, "My reply to this is simple. The objectivity of the text is an illusion and, moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing. . . . A line of print is so obviously there . . . that it seems to be the sole repository of whatever value and meaning we associate with it" . To Fish, the poem can't disappear because it was never actually there in the first place except as a reflection of the interpretive strategy used to approach it.

Fish contends that those formal features are themselves interpretations and so any interpretation based on them is illegitimate. He does not deny the importance of formal features, but in his essay "What is Stylistics and Why are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?," he asserts that rather than possessing any particular meaning in and of themselves, these features ". . . acquire it . . . by virtue of their position in a structure of experience" . In other words, the reader brings his particular interpretive strategy (a product of his cumulative experiences) to the text and creates meaning out of the pattern of formal features that are found within it. He strengthens this argument in "What is Stylistics, Part II":



*Did u know?* Fish's theory rejects the claims of the New Critics (formalists) that the work itself contains meaning that can be derived by a study of its formal features.

"Here my thesis is that formal patterns are themselves the products of interpretation and that therefore there is no such thing as a formal pattern, at least in the sense necessary for the practice of stylistics: that is no pattern that one can observe before interpretation is hazarded and which therefore can be used to prefer one interpretation to another. The conclusion, however, is not that there are no formal patterns but that there are always formal patterns; it is just that the formal patterns there always are will always be the product of a prior interpretive act, and therefore will be available for discerning only so long as that act is in force".

This theory ran into trouble, however, because Fish was at once denying that meaning was in the text and at the same time using the text to control the reader's experience. He begins to address this problem in "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?" by proposing that the reader actually makes the text by bringing to it certain assumptions that are a product of his "informedness." By this he doesn't mean that the reader can make up any meaning he wants. On the contrary, he states, "Mine is not an argument for an infinitely plural or open text, but for a text that is always set; and yet because it is set not for all places or all times but for wherever and however long a particular way of reading [interpretation] is in force, it is a text that can change".

Still, this seems to point out a lack of stability and consistency in interpretation that is contradicted by the fact that so many readers come up with the same general "take" on the same texts. Fish addresses this question in "Interpreting the Variorum." He asks: "If interpretive acts are the source of forms rather than the other way around, why isn't it the case that readers are always performing the same acts or a sequence of random acts, and therefore creating the same forms or a random succession of forms?" . He goes on to say, ". . . both the stability of interpretation among readers and the variety

of interpretation in the career of a single reader would seem to argue for the existence of something independent of and prior to interpretive acts . . .". What it is that is prior to these acts is the existence of a reader's interpretive strategy that is present before he actually approaches the work. In other words, he doesn't have to read a work in a certain way, but, as a function of his interpretive strategy, he chooses to do so. To illustrate this he uses St. Augustine's argument from his *On Christian Doctrine* that " . . . everything in the Scriptures, and indeed in the world when it is properly read, points to (bears the meaning of) God's love for us and our answering responsibility to love our fellow creatures for His sake". If something does not seem to point in this direction, Augustine says that it is simply a figurative way of creating the same "text" and that it is the Christian's duty to find a way to interpret (to choose to interpret) it as such. In his "Normal Circumstances and Other Special Cases," Fish describes how baseball player Pat Kelly's conversion is exemplary of this. Kelly credited all of his homeruns to his faith in God, and Fish points out that,

His conversion follows the pattern prescribed by Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine*. The eye that was in bondage to the phenomenal world (had as its constitutive principle the autonomy of that world) has been cleansed and purged and is now capable of seeing what is really there, what is obvious, what anyone who has the eyes can see: 'to the healthy and pure internal eye He is everywhere.' He is everywhere not as the result of an interpretive act self-consciously performed on data otherwise available, but as the result of an interpretive act performed at so deep a level that it is indistinguishable from consciousness itself .

Fish posits that this idea is really an interpretive strategy for looking at the world, and a very successful one at that. In the same way, he says, readers choose, on a level that is "indistinguishable from consciousness itself," to interpret texts either as the same or different and this choice produces the sameness or differentness of the texts' formal features.

This may shed some light on why an individual reader may read a text one way or another, but it doesn't address why separate readers often have the same (or at least similar) understanding of the same text. Fish states that "they don't have to" but when they do it is because of his " . . . notion of interpretive communities . . ." which are " . . . made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing [creating meaning in] texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" . This idea of interpretive communities is central to Fish's position, as is evidenced by the fact that *Is There a Text in This Class* is subtitled *The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. In the introduction to the book he makes this position clear by stating, " . . . the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it". This implies once again that the meaning of a text is brought to it by readers and that it can change from place to place and from time to time.

In *Normal Circumstances*, Fish's idea that a text, though fixed at a certain time and place, can change over time brings up the concept of "context" as is illustrated in the following passage:

. . . we usually reserve 'literal' for the single meaning a text will always (or should always) have, while I am using 'literal' to refer to the different single meanings a text will have in a succession of different situations. There always is a literal meaning because in any situation there is always a meaning that seems obvious in the sense that it is there independently of anything we might do. But that only means that we have already done it, and in another situation, when we have already done something else, there will be another obvious, that is, literal, meaning . . . We are never not in a situation. Because we are never not in a situation, we are never not in the act of interpreting. Because we are never not in the act of interpreting, there is no possibility of reaching a level of meaning beyond or below interpretation .

In other words, everything is always already in a context, and it is because of this context that sentences have meaning.

Fish takes his argument a step further by contesting the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts are ones in which the meaning of the utterance is clearly imbedded

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in its "text." Indirect speech acts are ones in which the meaning lies outside the "text" but is understood by the hearer due to a shared contextual understanding with the speaker. In both cases the contextual understanding of the utterance is typically considered to be subject to "normal" circumstances. In other words, the hearer knows what the speaker is talking about, whether he uses direct or indirect language, because the utterance and its reception occur in a situation that lies in the realm of both parties' understanding. It is this idea of normal circumstances with which Fish takes issue. He says, ". . . I am making the same argument for 'normal context' that I have made for 'literal meaning' . . . There will always be a normal context, but it will not always be the same one". As an example he uses John Searle's use of the following situation:

Searle begins by imagining a conversation between two students. Student X says, "Let's go to the movies tonight," and student Y replies, "I have to study for an exam." The first sentence, Searle declares, "constitutes a proposal in virtue of its meaning," but the second sentence, which is understood as a rejection of the proposal, is not so understood in virtue of its meaning because "in virtue of its meaning it is simply a statement about Y". It is here, in the assertion that either of these sentences is ever taken in the way it is "in virtue of its meaning," that this account must finally be attacked. For if this were the case, then we would have to say that there is something about the meaning of a sentence that makes it more available for some illocutionary uses than for others, and this is precisely what Searle proceeds to say about "I have to study for an exam": "Statements of this form do not, in general, constitute rejections of proposals, even in cases in which they are made in response to a proposal. Thus, if Y had said I have to eat popcorn tonight or I have to tie my shoes in a normal context, neither of these utterances would have been a rejection of the proposal" .

At this point, Fish asks "Normal for whom?" in regards to Searle's proposed normal context. He then goes on to list a number of situations in which eating popcorn and tying shoes could be taken as a rejection of a proposal as long as both X and Y were privy to the circumstances. To the argument that these circumstances are special as opposed to normal, Fish answers that "normal" is content specific and to speak of a normal context is to be either redundant (because whatever in a given context goes without saying is the normal) or to be incoherent (because it would refer to a context whose claim was not to be one)" . He does not intend to imply that an utterance can mean anything, but, rather, that its meaning is subject to certain constraints: ". . . chaos . . . would be possible only if a sentence could mean anything at all in the abstract." He goes on to point out, however, that "A sentence . . . is never in the abstract; it is always in a situation, and the situation will already have determined the purpose for which it can be used" .

It is difficult to place Fish in relation to the other critics we have examined in class. He seems to be anti-structuralist, anti-formalist, and anti-stylist, yet he does not deny the validity of many of their premises, only the conclusions they derive from them. Essentially Fish's position seems to be composed of the ideas that

1. reading is an activity,
2. rather than being imbedded in formal features, the meaning of any text is brought to it by the reader's interpretive strategy,
3. interpretive communities make it possible for there to be some agreement on the meanings of texts,
4. all acts of interpretation occur in some context or other.

These seem to be straightforward and even obvious assertions, yet they seem to frighten many critics. They apparently feel the same way that Wimsatt and Beardsley do, that Fish's method leads to a lack of certainty. Fish himself does not try to argue against this claim directly. In fact, at the end of *Interpreting the Variorum* he himself admits this uncertainty when discussing how one can know to which interpretive community one belongs. He says, "The answer is he can't, since any evidence brought forward to support the claim would itself be an interpretation . . ." All one can have as far as proof of membership is a ". . . nod of recognition from someone in the same community . . ." He ends this essay with the only words that someone who speaks from his viewpoint can truly maintain with any certainty: "I say it [we know] to you now, knowing full well that you will agree with me (that is, understand) only if you already agree with me" .

## 6.2 Theory of Stanley Fish

At this point I would like to take a closer look at Stanley Fish's reader-response theory. It is my intent first to examine Fish's literary theory before criticizing it and then tie it in more broadly with the privatization of meaning and other phenomena occurring in philosophy and society which I will argue are historically conditioned. In other words, Fish's thesis is influenced by existential notions of truth and the rise of modernism/post-modernism.

The phenomenological method has much to commend itself to us as it focuses on what happens in the reader's mind as he or she reads. Fish applies this method in his early work "Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost." His thesis in this work is that Milton used a number of literary techniques intentionally to lead the reader into a false sense of security whereupon he would effect a turn from the reader's expectations in order to surprise the reader with his own prideful self-sufficiency. The supposed intent of Milton was to force the reader to see his own sinfulness in a new light and be forced back to God's grace. Fish's thesis is a rather ingenious approach to Paradise Lost and to Milton's (mis)leading of the reader.

Fish's concern at this point in his career is with what "is really happening in the act of reading," and this is reflected in his compilations of essays entitled *Is There a Text in This Class?* especially the first half. Fish defines his own phenomenological approach as "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time. His concern is with what the text does as opposed to what it means. As J. F. Worthen suggests, much of his work can be seen as a reaction against the formalism that characterized the age of New Critical theory which held that meaning was embedded in the textual artifact or, as Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to it, "the object". He suggests that, "The context for the discussion is the question of whether formal features exist prior to and independently of interpretive strategies." As one might imagine Fish eventually offers a negative response to this question. He posits that rather than having a text that contains formal features identifiable in all times and places that it is the reader that projects these features onto the text, thereby also answering "No" to the question, "Is there a text in this class?"

From this point in Fish's career his theories evolve into a form of criticism that rejects the author's intentionality and places meaning solely within the arena of those receiving the text. Thus his theory is sometimes called "reception aesthetics" or "affective stylistics." Fish claims that it is the interpretive community that creates its own reality. It is the community that invests a text, or for that matter life itself, with meaning. Those who claim that meaning is to be found in some eternal superstructure or substructure of reality he labels "foundationalists." Naturally, because foundationalists comprise their own interpretive communities and interpret through such a grid, they will be opposed to theories such as his own. His theory is epistemological in that it deals not so much with literary criticism (although the implications for such are tremendous) as with how one comes to know. In the following analysis of Fish's theory I will focus primarily on his later reader-response theory.



*Did u know?* There are really two kinds of reader-response criticism: one is a phenomenological approach to reading which characterizes much of Fish's earlier work, and the other is an epistemological theory characteristic of Fish's later work.

## 6.3 Stanley Fish: "Is There a Text In This Class?"

On the first day of the new semester, a colleague at Johns Hopkins University was approached by a student who, as it turned out, had just taken a course from me. She put to him what I think you would agree is a perfectly straightforward question: "Is there a text in this class?" Responding with a confidence so perfect that he was unaware of it (although in telling the story, he refers to this



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moment as "walking into the trap"), my colleague said, "Yes, it's the Norton Anthology of Literature," whereupon the trap (set not by the student but by the infinite capacity of language for being appropriated) was sprung: "No, no," she said, "I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" Now it is possible (and for many tempting) to read this anecdote as an illustration of the dangers that follow upon listening to people like me who preach the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings; but in what follows I will try to read it as an illustration of how baseless the fear of these dangers finally is.

Of the charges levied against what Meyer Abrams has recently called the New Readers (Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom, Stanley Fish) the most persistent is that these apostles of indeterminacy and undecidability ignore, even as they rely upon, the "norms and possibilities" embedded in language, the "linguistic meanings" words undeniably have, and thereby invite us to abandon "our ordinary realm of experience in speaking, hearing, reading and understanding," for a world in which "no text can mean anything in particular" and where "we can never say just what anyone means by anything he writes." The charge is that literal or normative meanings are overridden by the actions of willful interpreters. Suppose we examine this indictment in the context of the present example. What, exactly, is the normative or literal or linguistic meaning of "Is there a text in this class?"

Within the framework of contemporary critical debate (as it is reflected in the pages, say, of *Critical Inquiry*) there would seem to be only two ways of answering this question: either there is a literal meaning of the utterance and we should be able to say what it is, or there are as many meanings as there are readers and no one of them is literal. But the answer suggested by my little story is that the utterance has two literal meanings: within the circumstances assumed by my colleague (I don't mean that he took the step of assuming them, but that he was already stepping within them) the utterance is obviously a question about whether or not here is a required textbook in this particular course; but within the circumstances to which he was alerted by his student's corrective response, the utterance is just as obviously a question about the instructor's position (within the range of positions available in contemporary literary theory) on the status of the text.

Notice that we do not have here a case of indeterminacy or undecidability but a determinacy and decidability that do not always have the same shape and that can, and in this instance do, change. My colleague was not hesitating between two (or more) possible meanings of the utterance; rather, he immediately apprehended what seemed to be an inescapable meaning, given his prestructured understanding of the situation, and then he immediately apprehended another inescapable meaning when that understanding was altered. Neither meaning was imposed (a favorite word in the anti-new-reader polemics) on a more normal one by a private, idiosyncratic interpretive act; both interpretations were a function of precisely the public and constituting norms (of language and understanding) invoked by Abrams. It is just that these norms are not embedded in the language (where they may be read out by anyone with sufficiently clear, that is, unbiased, eyes) but inhere in all institutional structure within which one hears utterances as already organized with reference to certain assumed purposes and goals. Because both my colleague and his student are situated in that institution, their interpretive activities are not free, but what constrains them are the understood practices and assumptions of the institution and not the rules and fixed meanings of a language system.

Another way to put this would be to say that neither reading of the question—which we might for convenience sake label as "Is there a text in this class?" and "Is there a text in this class?"—would be immediately available to any native speaker of the language. "Is there a text in this class?" is interpretable or readable only by someone who already knows what is included under the general rubric "first day of class" (what concerns animate students, what bureaucratic matters must be attended to before instruction begins) and who therefore hears the utterances under the aegis of that knowledge, which is not applied after the fact but is responsible for the shape the fact immediately has. To someone whose consciousness is not already informed by that knowledge, "is there a text in this class?", would be just as unavailable as "is there a text in this class?" would be to someone who was not already aware of the disputed issues in contemporary literary theory. I am not saying that for some readers or hearers the question would be wholly unintelligible

(indeed, in the course of this essay I will be arguing that unintelligibility, in the strict or pure sense, is an impossibility), but that there are readers and hearers for whom the intelligibility of the question would have neither of the shapes it had, in a temporal succession, for my colleague. It is possible, for example, to imagine someone who would hear or intend the question as an inquiry about the location of an object, that is, "I think I left my text in this class; have you seen it?" We would then have an "Is there a text in this class?" and the possibility, feared by the defenders of the normative and determinate, of an endless succession in numbers, that is, of a world in which every utterance has an infinite plurality of meanings. But that is not what the example, however it might be extended, suggests at all. In any of the situations I have imagined (and in any that I might be able to imagine) the meaning of the utterance would be severely constrained, not after it was heard but in the ways in which it could, in the first place, be heard. An infinite plurality of meaning would be a fear only if sentences existed in a state in which they were not already embedded in, and had come into view as a function of some situation or other. That state, if it could be located, would be the normative one, and it would be disturbing indeed if the norm were free-floating and indeterminate.

But there is no such state; sentences emerge only in situations, and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible. (My colleague's experience is precisely an illustration). This does not mean that there is no way to discriminate between the meanings an utterance can have in different situations, but that the discrimination will already have been made by virtue of our being in a situation (we are never not in one) and that in another situation the discrimination will also have already been made, but differently. In other words, while at any one point it is always possible to order and rank "Is there a text in this class?" and "Is there a text in this class?" (because they will always have already been ranked), it will never be possible to give them an immutable once-and-for-all ranking, a ranking that is independent of their appearance or nonappearance in situations (because it is only in situations that they do or do not appear).

Nevertheless, there is a distinction to be made between the two that allows us to say that, in a limited sense, one is more normal than the other: for while each is perfectly normal in the context in which their literalness is immediately obvious (the successive contexts occupied by my colleague), as things stand now, one of those contexts is surely more available, and therefore more likely to be the perspective within which the utterance is heard, than the other. Indeed, we seem to have here an instance of what I would call "institutional nesting": If "Is there a text in this class?", is hearable only by those who know what is included under the rubric "first day of class," and if "Is there a text in this class?", is hearable only by those whose categories of understanding include the concerns of contemporary literary theory, then it is obvious that in a random population presented with the utterance, more people would "hear" "is there a text in this class?", than "Is there a text in this class?"; and, moreover, that while "Is there a text in this class?" could be immediately hearable by someone for whom "Is there a text in this class?" would have to be laboriously explained, it is difficult to imagine someone capable of hearing "Is there a text in this class?" who was not already capable of hearing "Is there a text in this class." (One is hearable by anyone in the profession and by most students and by many workers in the book trade, and the other in the profession who would not think it peculiar to find, as I did recently, a critic referring to a phrase "made popular by Lacan."). To admit as much is not to weaken my argument by reinstating the category of the normal, because the category as it appears in that argument is not transcendental but institutional; and while no institution is so universally in force and so perdurable that the meanings it enables will be normal for ever, some institutions or forms of life are so widely lived in that for a great many people the meaning they enable seem "naturally" available and it takes a special effort to see that they are products of circumstances.

The point is an important one, because it accounts for the success with which an Abrams or an E. D. Hirsch can appeal to a shared understanding of ordinary language and argue from that understanding to the availability of a core of determinate meanings. When Hirsch offers "The air is crisp" as an example of a "verbal meaning" that is accessible to all speakers of the language, and

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distinguishes what is sharable and determinate about it from the associations that may, in certain circumstances, accompany it (for example, "I should have eaten less at supper," "Crisp air reminds me of my childhood in Vermont"), he is counting on his readers to agree so completely with his sense of what that shared and normative verbal meaning is that he does not bother even to specify it; and although I have not taken a survey, I would venture to guess that his optimism, with respect to this particular example, is well founded. That is, most, if not all, of his readers immediately understand the utterance as a rough meteorological description predicting a certain quality of the local atmosphere. But the "happiness" of the example, far from making Hirsch's point (which is always, as he has recently reaffirmed, to maintain "the stable determinacy of meaning") makes mine. The obviousness of the utterance's meaning is not a function of the values its words have in a linguistic system that is independent of context; rather, it is because the Words are heard as already embedded in a context that they have a meaning that Hirsch can then cite as obvious. One can see this by embedding the words in another context and observing how quickly another "obvious" meaning emerges. Suppose, for example, we came upon "The air is crisp" (which you are even now hearing as Hirsch assumes you hear it) in the middle of a discussion of music ("When the pieces played correctly the air is crisp"): it would immediately be heard as a comment on the performance by an instrument or instruments of a musical air. Moreover, it would only be heard that way, and to hear it in Hirsch's way would require all effort on the order of a strain. It could be objected that in Hirsch's text "The air is crisp", has no contextual setting at all; it is merely presented, and therefore any agreement as to its meaning must be because of the utterance's a contextual properties. But there is a contextual setting and the sign of its presence is precisely the absence of any reference to it. That is, it is impossible even to think of a sentence independently of a context, and when we are asked to consider a sentence for which no context has been specified, we will automatically hear it the context in which it has been most often encountered. Thus Hirsch invokes a context by not invoking it: by not surrounding the utterance with circumstances, he directs us to imagine it in the circumstances in which it is most likely to have been produced: and to so imagine it is already to have given it a shape that seems at the moment to be the only one possible.

What conclusions can be drawn from these two examples? First of all, neither my colleague nor the reader of Hirsch's sentence is constrained by the meanings words have in a normative linguistic system; and yet neither is free to confer on an utterance any meaning he likes. Indeed, "confer" is exactly the wrong word because it implies a two-stage procedure in which a reader or hearer first scrutinizes an utterance and then gives it a meaning. The argument of the preceding pages can be reduced to the assertion that there is no such first stage, that one hears an utterance within, and not as preliminary to determining, a knowledge of its purposes and concerns, and that to so hear it is already to have assigned it a shape and given it a meaning. In other words, the problem of how meaning is determined is only a problem if there is a point at which its determination has not yet been made, and I am saying that there is not such point.

I am not saying that one is never in the position of having to self-consciously figure out what an utterance means. Indeed, my colleague is in just such a position when he is informed by his student that he has not heard her question as she intended it ("No, No, I mean in this class we believe in poems and things, or is it just us) and therefore must now figure it out. But the "it" in this (or any other) case is not a collection of words waiting to be assigned a meaning but an utterance whose already assigned meaning has been found to be inappropriate. While my colleague has to begin all over again, he does not have to begin from square one; and indeed he never was at square one, since from the very first his hearing of the student's question was informed by his assumption of what its concerns could possibly be. (That is why he is not "free" even if he is unconstrained by determinate meanings.) It is that assumption rather than his performance within it that is challenged by the student's correction. She tells him that he has mistaken her meaning, but this is not to say that he has made a mistake in combining her words and syntax into a meaningful unit; it is rather that the meaningful unit he immediately discerns is a function of a mistaken identification (made before she speaks) of her intention. He was prepared as she stood before him to hear the kind of thing students ordinarily say on the first day of class, and therefore

that is precisely what he heard. He has not misread the text (this is not an error in calculation) but mis-pre-read the text, and if he is to correct himself he must make another (pre) determination of the structure of interests from which her question issues. This, of course, is exactly what he does and the question of how he does it is a crucial one, which can best be answered by first considering the ways in which he didn't do it.

He didn't do it by attending to the literal meaning of her response. That is, this is not a case in which someone who has been misunderstood clarifies her meaning by making more explicit, by varying or adding to her words in such a way as to render their sense inescapable. Within the circumstances of utterance as he has assumed them her words are perfectly clear, and what she is doing is asking him to imagine other circumstances in which the same words will be equally, but differently, clear. Nor is it that the words she does add ("No, No, I mean ...") direct him to those other circumstances by picking them out from an inventory of all possible ones. For this to be the case there would have to be an inherent relationship between the words she speaks and a particular set of circumstances (this would be a higher level literalism) such that any competent speaker of the language hearing those words would immediately be referred to that set. But I have told the story to several competent speakers of the language who simply didn't get it, and one friend—a professor of philosophy—reported to me that in the interval between his hearing the story and my explaining it to him (and just how I was able to do that is another crucial question) he found himself asking "What kind of joke is this and have I missed it?" For a time at least he remained able only to hear "Is there a text in this class" as my colleague first heard it; the student's additional words, far from leading him to another hearing, only made him aware of his distance from it. In contrast, there are those who not only get the story but get it before I tell it: that is, they know in advance what is coming as soon as I say that a colleague of mine was recently asked, "is there a text in this class?" Who are these people and what is it that makes their comprehension of the story so immediate and easy? Well, one could say, without being the least bit facetious, that they are the people who come to hear me speak because they are the people who already know my position on certain matters (or know that I will have a position). That is, they hear, "Is there a text in this class?" even as it appears at the beginning of the anecdote (or for that matter as a title of an essay) in the light of their knowledge of what I am likely to do with it. They hear it coming from me, in circumstances which have committed me to declaring myself on a range of issues that are sharply delimited. My colleague was finally able to hear it in just that way, as coming from me, not because I was there in his classroom, nor because the words of the student's question pointed to me in a way that would have been obvious to any hearer, but because he was able to think of me in an office three doors down from his telling students that there are no determinate meanings and that the stability of the text is an illusion. Indeed, as he reports it, the moment of recognition and comprehension consisted of saying to himself. "Ah, there's one of Fish's victims!" he did not say this because her words identified her as such but because his ability to see her as such informed his perception of her words. The answer to the question "How did he get from her words to the circumstances within which she intended him to hear them?" is that he must already be thinking within those circumstances in order to be able to hear her words as referring to them. The question, then, must be rejected, because it assumes that the construing of sense leads to the identification of the context of utterance rather than the other way around. This does not mean that the context comes first and that once it has been identified the construing of sense can begin. This would be only to reverse the order of precedence, whereas precedence is beside the point because the two actions it would order (the identification of context and the making of sense) occur simultaneously. One does not say "Here I am in a situation: now I can begin to determine what these words mean." To be in a situation is to see the words, these or any other, as already meaningful. For my colleague to realize that he may be confronting one of my victims is at the same time to hear what she says as a question about his theoretical beliefs.

But to dispose of one "how" question is only to raise another: if her words do not lead him to the context of her utterance, how does he get there? Why did he think of me telling students that there were no determinate meanings and not think of someone or something else? First of all, he might well have. That is, he might well have guessed that she was coming from another direction



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(inquiring, let us say, as to whether the focus of this class was to be the poems and essays or our responses to them, a question in the same line of country as hers but quite distinct from it) or he might have simply been stymied, like my philosopher friend, confined, in the absence of an explanation, to his first determination of her concerns and unable to make any sense of her words other than the sense he originally made. How, then, did he do it? In part, he did it because he could do it; he was able to get to this context because it was already part of his repertoire for organizing the world and its events. The category "one of Fish's victims" was one he already had and didn't have to work for. Of course, it did not always have him, in that his world was not always being organized by it, and it certainly did not have him at the beginning of the conversation; but it was available to him, and he to it, and all he had to do was to recall it or be recalled to it for the meanings it subtended to emerge. (Had it not been available to him, the career of his comprehension would have been different and we will come to a consideration of that difference shortly.)

This, however, only pushes our inquiry back further. How or why was he recalled to it? The answer to this question must be probabilistic and it begins with the recognition that when something changes, not everything changes. Although my colleague's understanding of his circumstances is transformed in the course of this conversation, the circumstances are still understood to be academic ones, and within that continuing (if modified) understanding, the directions his thought might take are already severely limited. He still presumes, as he did at first, that the student's question has something to do with university business in general, and with English literature in particular, and it is the organizing rubrics associated with these areas of experience that are likely to occur to him. One of those rubrics is "what goes-on-in-other-classes" and one of those other classes is mine. And so, by a route that is neither entirely unmarked nor wholly determined, he comes to me and to the notion "one of Fish's victims" and to a new construing of what his student has been saying.

Of course that route would have been much more circuitous if the category "one of Fish's victims" was not already available to him as a device for producing intelligibility. Had that device not been part of his repertoire, had he been incapable of being recalled to it because he never knew it in the first place, how would he have proceeded? The answer is that he could not have,.. proceeded at all, which does not mean that one is trapped forever in the categories of understanding at one's disposal (or the.. categories at whose disposal one is), but that the introduction of new categories or the expansion of old ones to include new (and therefore newly seen) data must always come from the outside or from what is perceived, for a time, to be the outside. In the event that he was unable to identify the structure of her concerns because it had never been his (or he its), it would have been her obligation to explain it to him. And here we run up against another instance of the problem we have been considering all along. She could not explain it to him by varying or adding to her words, by being more explicit, because her words will only be intelligible if he already has the knowledge they are supposed to convey, the knowledge of the assumptions and interests from which they issue. It is clear, then, that she would have to make a new start, although she would not have to start from scratch (indeed, starting from scratch is never a possibility); but she would have to back up to some point at which there was a shared agreement as to what was reasonable to say so that a new and wider basis for agreement could be fashioned. In this particular case, for example, she might begin with the fact that her interlocutor already knows what I text is; that is, he has a way of thinking about it that is responsible for his hearing of her first question as one about bureaucratic classroom procedures. (You will remember that "he" in these sentences is no longer my colleague but someone who does not have his special knowledge.) It is that way of thinking that she must labor to extend or challenge, first, perhaps, by pointing out that there are those who think about the text in other ways, and then by trying to find a category of his own understanding which might serve as an analogue to the understanding he does not yet share. He might, for example, be familiar with those psychologists who argue for the constitutive power of perception, or with Gombrich's theory of the beholder's share, or with that philosophical tradition in which the stability of objects has always been a matter of dispute. The example must remain hypothetical and skeletal, because it can only be fleshed out after a determination of the particular beliefs and assumptions that would make the explanation necessary in the first place; for whatever

they were, they would dictate the strategy by which she would work to supplant or change them. It is when such a strategy has been successful that the import of her words will become clear, not because she has reformulated or refined them but because they will now be read or heard within the same system of intelligibility from which they issue.

In short, this hypothetical interlocutor will in time he brought to the same point of comprehension my colleague enjoys when he is able to say to himself, "Ah, there's one of Fish's victims," although presumably he will say something very different to himself if he says anything at all. The difference, however, should not obscure the basic similarities between the two experiences, one reported, the other imagined. In both cases the words that are uttered are immediately heard within a set of assumptions about the direction from which they could possibly be coming and in both cases what is required is that the hearing occur within another set of assumptions in relation to which the same words ("is there a text in this class?") will no longer be the same. It is just that while my colleague is able to meet that requirement by calling to mind a context of utterance that is already a part of his repertoire, the repertoire of his hypothetical stand-in must be expanded to include that context so that should he some day be in all analogous situation. he would be able to call it to mind.

The distinction, then, is between already having an ability and having to acquire it, but it is not finally an essential distinction, because the routes by which that ability could be exercised on the one hand, and learned on the other, are so similar. They are similar first of all because they are similarly not determined by words. Just as the student's words will not direct my colleague to a context he already has, so will they fail to direct someone not furnished with that context to its discovery. And yet in neither case does the absence of such a mechanical determination mean that the route one travels is randomly found. The change from one structure of understanding to another is not a rupture but a modification of the interests and concerns that are already in place; and because they are already in place, they constrain the direction of their own modification. That is, in both cases the hearer is already in a situation informed by, tacitly known purposes and goals, and in both cases he ends up in another situation whose purposes and goals stand in some elaborated relation (of contrast, opposition, expansion, extension) to those they supplant. (The one relation in which they could not stand is no relation at all.) It is just that in one case the network of elaboration (front the text as an obviously physical object to the question of whether or not the text is a physical object) has already been articulated (although not all of its articulations are in focus at one time; selection is always occurring), while in the other the articulation of the network is the business of the teacher (here the student) who begins, necessarily, with what is already given.

The final similarity between the two cases is that in neither is success assured. It was no more inevitable that my colleague tumble to the context of his student's utterance than it would be inevitable that she could introduce that context to someone previously unaware of it; and, indeed, had my colleague remained puzzled (had he simply not thought of me), it would have been necessary for the student to bring him along in a way that was finally indistinguishable from the way she would bring someone to a new knowledge, that is, by beginning with the shape of his present understanding.

I have lingered so long over the unpacking of this anecdote that its relationship to the problem of authority in the classroom and in literary criticism may seem obscure. Let me recall you to it by recalling the contention of Abrams and others that authority depends upon the existence of a determinate core of meanings because in the absence of such a core there is no normative or public way of construing what anyone says or writes, with the result that interpretation becomes a matter of individual and private construals, none of which is subject to challenge or correction. In literary criticism this means that no interpretation can be said to be better or worse than any other, and in the classroom this means that we have no answer to the student who says my interpretation is as valid as yours. It is only if there is a shared basis of agreement at once guiding interpretation and providing a mechanism for deciding between interpretations that a total and debilitating relativism can be avoided.



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But the point of my analysis has been to show that while "Is there a text in this class?" does not have a determinate meaning, a meaning that survives the sea change of situations, in any situation we might imagine the meaning of the utterance is either perfectly clear or capable, in the course of time, of being clarified. What is it that makes this possible, if it is not the 'possibilities and norms' already encoded in language? How does communication ever occur if not by reference to a public and stable norm? The answer, implicit in everything I have already said, is that communication occurs within situations and that to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place; and it is within the assumption of these purposes and goals that any utterance is immediately heard. I stress immediately because it seems to me that the problem of communication, as someone like Abrams poses it, is a problem only because he assumes a distance between one's receiving of an utterance and the determination of its meaning -a kind of dead space when one has only the words and then faces the task of construing them. If there were such a space, a moment before interpretation began, then it would be necessary to have recourse to some mechanical and algorithmic procedure by means of which meanings could be calculated and in relation to which one could recognize mistakes. What I have been arguing is that meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in the language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms. That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but social; and therefore it is not a single structure with a privileged relationship to the process of communication as it occurs in any situation but a structure that changes when one situation, with its assumed background of practices, purposes, and goals, has given way to another. In other words, the shared basis of agreement sought by Abrams and others is never not already found, although it is not always the same one.

Many will find in this last sentence, and in the argument to which it is a conclusion, nothing more than a sophisticated version of the relativism they fear. It will do no good, they say, to speak of norms and standards that are context-specific, because this is merely to authorize an infinite plurality of norms and standards, and we are still left without any way of adjudicating between them and between the competing systems of value of which they are functions. In short, to have many standards is to have no standards at all.

On one level this counter-argument is unassailable, but on another level it is finally beside the point. It is unassailable as a general and theoretical conclusion: the positing of context- or institution-specific norms surely rules out the possibility of a norm whose validity would be recognized by everyone, no matter what his situation. But it is beside the point for any particular individual, for since everyone is situated somewhere, there is no one for whom the absence of an asituational norm would be of any practical consequence, in the sense that his performance or his confidence in his ability to perform would be impaired. So that while it is generally true that to have many standards is to have none at all, it is not true for anyone in particular (for there is no one in a position to speak "generally"), and therefore it is a truth of which one can say "it doesn't matter."

In other words, while relativism is a position one can entertain, it is not a position one can occupy. No one can be a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative for him than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold. The fear that in a world of indifferently authorized norms and values the individual is without a basis for action is groundless because no one is indifferent to the norms and values that enable his consciousness. It is in the name of personally held (in fact they are doing the holding) norms and values that the individual acts and argues, and he does so with the full confidence that attends belief when his beliefs change, the norms and values to which he once gave unthinking assent will have been demoted to the status of opinions and become the objects of an analytical and critical attention; but that attention will itself be enabled by a new set of norms and values that are, for the time being, as unexamined and undoubted as those they displace. The point is that there is never a moment when one believes nothing, when consciousness is innocent of any and all categories of thought, and whatever categories of thought are operative at a given moment will serve as an undoubted ground.

Here, I suspect, a defender of determinate meaning would cry "solipsist" and argue that a confidence that had its source in the individual's categories of thought would have no public value. That is, unconnected to any shared and stable system of meanings, it would not enable one to transact the verbal business of everyday life; a shared intelligibility would be impossible in a world where everyone was trapped in the circle of his own assumptions and opinions. The reply to this is that an individual's assumptions and opinions are not "his own" in any sense that would give body to the fear of solipsism. That is, he is not their origin (in fact it might be more accurate to say that they are his); rather, it is their prior availability which delimits in advance the paths that his consciousness can possibly take. When my colleague is in the act of construing his student's question ("Is there a text in this class?"), none of the interpretive strategies at his disposal are uniquely his, in the sense that he thought them up; they follow from his preunderstanding of the interests and goals that could possibly animate the speech of someone functioning within the institution of academic America, interests and goals that are the particular property of no one in particular but which link everyone for whom their assumption is so habitual as to be unthinking. They certainly link my colleague and his student, who are able to communicate and even to reason about one another's intentions, not, however, because their interpretive efforts are constrained by the shape of an independent language but because their shared understanding of what could possibly be at stake in a classroom situation results in language appearing to them in the same shape (or successions of shapes). That shared understanding is the basis of the confidence with which they speak and reason, but its categories are their own only in the sense that as actors within an institution they automatically fall heir to the institution's way of making sense, its systems of intelligibility. That is why it is so hard for someone whose very being is defined by his position within an institution (and if not this one, then some other) to explain to someone outside it a practice or a meaning that seems to him to require no explanation, because he regards it as natural. Such a person, when pressed, is likely to say, "but that's just the way it's done" or "but isn't it obvious" and so testify that the practice or meaning in question is community property, as, in a sense, he is too.

We see then that (1) communication does occur, despite the absence of an independent and context-free system of meanings, that (2) those who participate in this communication do so confidently rather than provisionally (they are not relativists), and that (3) while their confidence has its source in a set of beliefs, those beliefs are not individual-specific or idiosyncratic but communal and conventional (they are not solipsists). Of course, solipsism and relativism are what Abrams and Hirsch fear and what lead them to argue for the necessity of determinate meaning. But if, rather than acting on their own, interpreters act as extensions of an institutional community, solipsism and relativism are removed as fears because they are not possible modes of being. That is to say, the condition required for someone to be a solipsist or relativist, the condition of being independent of institutional assumptions and free to originate one's own purposes and goals, could never be realized, and therefore there is no point in trying to guard against it. Abrams, Hirsch, and company spend a great deal of time in a search for the ways to limit and constrain interpretation, but if the example of my colleague and his student can be generalized (and obviously I think it can be), what they are searching for is never not already found. In short, my message to them is finally not challenging, but consoling - not to worry.

## **6.4 Critical Appreciation**

Critics have greeted Fish's writings with a mixture of admiration and opposition. His first major scholarly work, *Surprised by Sin*, was praised by reviewers for its consideration of *Paradise Lost*, particularly in illustrating how the poem forces a sense of guilt upon the reader to open the reader to the work's instructive aims. This idea of the "guilty reader," however, was also criticized for rendering the reader incapable of forming a critical judgment and thus precluding criticism of the work. Critics began to take serious note of Fish's ideas with *Is There a Text In This Class?* Fish's enervating writing style apparently played a significant role in the book's success in winning critics over to his argument that, even more so than the text itself, the reader's response creates the meaning of a text. *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech* generated a considerable debate. Fish was criticized for what was observed to be an overly strong cynicism concerning liberalism; on the

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other hand, the book was praised as helping to revive, through wit and word play, the rather weary state of current legal discourse. Critics also reacted strongly to Professional Correctness. While Fish's case that the university holds the most promise as a site for intellectual integrity was accepted, critics argued that he was incorrect in pointing to the academic world as the source of its own potential demise, instead locating the danger in the contemporary political climate; in any case, "professionalism" was not expected by critics to save the day. The Trouble with Principle again caught the attention of reviewers, who pointed out Fish's methods for exposing the actual lack of neutrality in the "democratic discourse" of liberals. Fish's opposition to the "principles" of liberalism, however, was not found to be either original in its stance or conclusive in terms of supplying a remedy for the current political state. Despite the criticisms found in response to the author's claims, Fish is known as an insightful critic of contemporary culture, one certainly not timid about potentially drawing the ire of his peers; whether they agree with him or not, critics have recognized Fish for the energetic creativity of his thought.

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Reading is an ..... .
  - (a) Art
  - (b) Activity
  - (c) Interpretations
  - (d) None of these
- (ii) Who was referred as the New Readers by Meyer Abrams ..... ?
  - (a) Jacques Derrida
  - (b) Harold Bloom
  - (c) Stanley Fish
  - (d) All of these
- (iii) Hirsch's Sentence is constrained by the meanings words have in a ..... .
  - (a) Socio-linguistic system
  - (b) Psycho-linguistics system
  - (c) Normative linguistic system
  - (d) None of these
- (iv) 'The air is' referred as ..... .
  - (a) Mild
  - (b) Short
  - (c) Crisp
  - (d) None of these

**6.5 Summary**

- Stanley Fish is one of America's most stimulating literary theorists. In this book, he undertakes a profound reexamination of some of criticism's most basic assumptions. He penetrates to the core of the modern debate about interpretation, explodes numerous misleading formulations, and offers a stunning proposal for a new way of thinking about the way we read.
- Fish begins by examining the relation between a reader and a text, arguing against the formalist belief that the text alone is the basic, knowable, neutral, and unchanging component of literary experience. But in arguing for the right of the reader to interpret and in effect create the literary work, he skillfully avoids the old trap of subjectivity. To claim that each reader essentially participates in the making of a poem or novel is not, he shows, an invitation to unchecked subjectivity and to the endless proliferation of competing interpretations. For each reader approaches a literary work not as an isolated individual but as part of a community of readers. "Indeed," he writes, "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings."
- The book is developmental, not static. Fish at all times reveals the evolutionary aspect of his work--the manner in which he has assumed new positions, altered them, and then moved on. Previously published essays are introduced by headnotes which relate them to the central notion of interpretive communities as it emerges in the final chapters. In the course of refining his theory, Fish includes rather than excludes the thinking of other critics and shows how

often they agree with him, even when he and they may appear to be most dramatically at odds. Engaging, lucid, provocative, this book will immediately find its place among the seminal works of modern literary criticism.

- These essays demonstrate why Fish has become the center--as both source and focus--of so much intellectual energy in contemporary American critical theory. For brilliance and forcefulness in argumentation and for sheer boldness of mind and spirit, he has no match.
- It is a great...pleasure these days to find a critic willing to discuss language, literature, reading, writing, and the community of readers on the understanding that the reader plays a real part in the production of his experience.
- No bare summary of his conclusions can do justice to the brilliance of his analyses...Is There a Text in This Class? is a substantial achievement which deserves the serious consideration of all students of literature. Its arguments are cogent, forceful and engaging, its style witty, personable and unpretentious, and its analyses are just, incisive and economical. Most important, the theory it advocates is provocative, comprehensive and, I believe, true.

## 6.6 Key-Words

1. Close reading : ‘Method’ of reading emphasized by new critics which pays careful attention to ‘the words on the page’ rather than the historical and ideological context, the biography or intentions of the author and so on. Close reading, despite its name, brackets questions of readers and reading as arbitrary and irrelevant to the text as an artifact (*see affective fallacy*). It assumes that the function of reading and criticism is simply to read carefully what is already ‘there’ in the text.

## 6.7 Review Questions

1. Discuss the Theory of Stanley Fish.
2. Briefly explain ‘Is Their Text In This Class’.
3. What is the normative or literal or linguistic meaning of Is There a Text in This Class? Discuss.

## Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (b)                      (ii) (d)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (c)

## 6.8 Further Readings



### Books

1. Lodge, David and Nigel Woods (eds.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edition, New Delhi: Pearson Education Ltd., 2005.
2. Guerin, Wilfred L. & et. al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 5th edition, New Delhi: OUP, 2007.
3. Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 1st edition, Manchester: MUP, 2002.
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## Unit 7: Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences-Jacques Derrida

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Life and Works of Derrida.
- Understand Derrida's Deconstruction.

### Introduction

Jacques Derrida was one of the most well-known twentieth century philosophers. He was also one of the most prolific. Distancing himself from the various philosophical movements and traditions that preceded him on the French intellectual scene (phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism), he developed a strategy called "deconstruction" in the mid 1960s. Although not purely negative, deconstruction is primarily concerned with something tantamount to a critique of the Western philosophical tradition. Deconstruction is generally presented via an analysis of specific texts. It seeks to expose, and then to subvert, the various binary oppositions that undergird our dominant ways of thinking-presence/absence, speech/writing, and so forth.

Deconstruction has at least two aspects: literary and philosophical. The literary aspect concerns the textual interpretation, where invention is essential to finding hidden alternative meanings in the text. The philosophical aspect concerns the main target of deconstruction: the "metaphysics of presence," or simply metaphysics. Starting from an Heideggerian point of view, Derrida argues that metaphysics affects the whole of philosophy from Plato onwards.

The deconstructive strategy is to unmask these too-sedimented ways of thinking, and it operates on them especially through two steps-reversing dichotomies and attempting to corrupt the dichotomies themselves. The strategy also aims to show that there are undecidables, that is, something that cannot conform to either side of a dichotomy or opposition. Undecidability returns in later period of Derrida's reflection, when it is applied to reveal paradoxes involved in notions such as gift giving or hospitality, whose conditions of possibility are at the same time their conditions of impossibility. Because of this, it is undecidable whether authentic giving or hospitality are either possible or impossible.

In this period, the founder of deconstruction turns his attention to ethical themes. In particular, the theme of responsibility to the other (for example, God or a beloved person) leads Derrida to leave the idea that responsibility is associated with a behavior publicly and rationally justifiable by general principles. Reflecting upon tales of Jewish tradition, he highlights the absolute singularity of responsibility to the other.

Deconstruction has had an enormous influence in psychology, literary theory, cultural studies, linguistics, feminism, sociology and anthropology. Poised in the interstices between philosophy and non-philosophy (or philosophy and literature), it is not difficult to see why this is the case. What follows in this article, however, is an attempt to bring out the philosophical significance of Derrida's thought.



*Did u know?* Metaphysics creates dualistic oppositions and installs a hierarchy that unfortunately privileges one term of each dichotomy (presence before absence, speech before writing, and so on).

## 7.1 Life and Works

In 1930, Derrida was born into a Jewish family in Algiers. He was also born into an environment of some discrimination. In fact, he either withdrew from, or was forced out of at least two schools during his childhood simply on account of being Jewish. He was expelled from one school because there was a 7% limit on the Jewish population, and he later withdrew from another school on account of the anti-semitism. While Derrida would resist any reductive understanding of his work based upon his biographical life, it could be argued that these kind of experiences played a large role in his insistence upon the importance of the marginal, and the other, in his later thought.

Derrida was twice refused a position in the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (where Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the majority of French intellectuals and academics began their careers), but he was eventually accepted to the institution at the age of 19. He hence moved from Algiers to France, and soon after he also began to play a major role in the leftist journal *Tel Quel*. Derrida's initial work in philosophy was largely phenomenological, and his early training as a philosopher was done largely through the lens of Husserl. Other important inspirations on his early thought include Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure, Levinas and Freud. Derrida acknowledges his indebtedness to all of these thinkers in the development of his approach to texts, which has come to be known as 'deconstruction'.

It was in 1967 that Derrida really arrived as a philosopher of world importance. He published three momentous texts (*Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*). All of these works have been influential for different reasons, but it is *Of Grammatology* that remains his most famous work (it is analysed in some detail in this article). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida reveals and then undermines the speech-writing opposition that he argues has been such an influential factor in Western thought. His preoccupation with language in this text is typical of much of his early work, and since the publication of these and other major texts (including *Dissemination*, *Glas*, *The Postcard*, *Spectres of Marx*, *The Gift of Death*, and *Politics of Friendship*), deconstruction has gradually moved from occupying a major role in continental Europe, to also becoming a significant player in the Anglo-American philosophical context. This is particularly so in the areas of literary criticism, and cultural studies, where deconstruction's method of textual analysis has inspired theorists like Paul de Man. He has also had lecturing positions at various universities, the world over. Derrida died in 2004.

Deconstruction has frequently been the subject of some controversy. When Derrida was awarded an honorary doctorate at Cambridge in 1992, there were howls of protest from many 'analytic' philosophers. Since then, Derrida has also had many dialogues with philosophers like John Searle,



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in which deconstruction has been roundly criticised, although perhaps unfairly at times. However, what is clear from the antipathy of such thinkers is that deconstruction challenges traditional philosophy in several important ways, and the remainder of this article will highlight why this is so.

## 7.2 Deconstructive Strategy

Derrida, like many other contemporary European theorists, is preoccupied with undermining the oppositional tendencies that have befallen much of the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, dualisms are the staple diet of deconstruction, for without these hierarchies and orders of subordination it would be left with nowhere to intervene. Deconstruction is parasitic in that rather than espousing yet another grand narrative, or theory about the nature of the world in which we partake, it restricts itself to distorting already existing narratives, and to revealing the dualistic hierarchies they conceal. While Derrida's claims to being someone who speaks solely in the margins of philosophy can be contested, it is important to take these claims into account. To the extent that it can be suggested that Derrida's concerns are often philosophical, they are clearly not phenomenological (he assures us that his work is to be read specifically against Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) and nor are they ontological.

Deconstruction, and particularly early deconstruction, functions by engaging in sustained analyses of particular texts. It is committed to the rigorous analysis of the literal meaning of a text, and yet also to finding within that meaning, perhaps in the neglected corners of the text (including the footnotes), internal problems that actually point towards alternative meanings. Derrida speaks of the first aspect of this deconstructive strategy as being akin to a fidelity and a "desire to be faithful to the themes and audacities of a thinking". At the same time, however, deconstruction also famously borrows from Martin Heidegger's conception of a 'destructive retrieve' and seeks to open texts up to alternative and usually repressed meanings that reside at least partly outside of the metaphysical tradition (although always also partly betrothed to it). This more violent and transgressive aspect of deconstruction is illustrated by Derrida's consistent exhortation to "invent in your own language if you can or want to hear mine; invent if you can or want to give my language to be understood". In suggesting that a faithful interpretation of him is one that goes beyond him, Derrida installs invention as a vitally important aspect of any deconstructive reading. He is prone to making enigmatic suggestions like "go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of coming or going", and ultimately, the merit of a deconstructive reading consists in this creative contact with another text that cannot be characterised as either mere fidelity or as an absolute transgression, but rather which oscillates between these dual demands. The intriguing thing about deconstruction, however, is that despite the fact that Derrida's own interpretations of specific texts are quite radical, it is often difficult to pinpoint where the explanatory exegesis of a text ends and where the more violent aspect of deconstruction begins. Derrida is always reluctant to impose 'my text', 'your text' designations too conspicuously in his texts. This is partly because it is even problematic to speak of a 'work' of deconstruction, since deconstruction only highlights what was already revealed in the text itself. All of the elements of a deconstructive intervention reside in the "neglected cornerstones" of an already existing system, and this equation is not altered in any significant way whether that 'system' be conceived of as metaphysics generally, which must contain its non-metaphysical track, or the writings of a specific thinker, which must also always testify to that which they are attempting to exclude.



*Did u know?* Deconstruction is, somewhat infamously, the philosophy that says nothing.

These are, of course, themes reflected upon at length by Derrida, and they have an immediate consequence on the meta-theoretical level. To the minimal extent that we can refer to Derrida's

own arguments, it must be recognised that they are always intertwined with the arguments of whomever, or whatever, he seeks to deconstruct. For example, Derrida argues that his critique of the Husserlian 'now' moment is actually based upon resources within Husserl's own text which elide the self-presence that he was attempting to secure (SP 64-66). If Derrida's point is simply that Husserl's phenomenology holds within itself conclusions that Husserl failed to recognise, Derrida seems to be able to disavow any transcendental or ontological position. This is why he argues that his work occupies a place in the margins of philosophy, rather than simply being philosophy *per se*.

Deconstruction contends that in any text, there are inevitably points of equivocation and 'undecidability' that betray any stable meaning that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text. The process of writing always reveals that which has been suppressed, covers over that which has been disclosed, and more generally breaches the very oppositions that are thought to sustain it. This is why Derrida's 'philosophy' is so textually based and it is also why his key terms are always changing, because depending upon who or what he is seeking to deconstruct, that point of equivocation will always be located in a different place.

This also ensures that any attempt to describe what deconstruction is, must be careful. Nothing would be more antithetical to deconstruction's stated intent than this attempt at defining it through the decidedly metaphysical question "what is deconstruction?" There is a paradoxicality involved in trying to restrict deconstruction to one particular and overarching purpose (OG 19) when it is predicated upon the desire to expose us to that which is wholly other (*tout autre*) and to open us up to alternative possibilities. At times, this exegesis will run the risk of ignoring the many meanings of Derridean deconstruction, and the widely acknowledged difference between Derrida's early and late work is merely the most obvious example of the difficulties involved in suggesting "deconstruction says this", or "deconstruction prohibits that".

That said, certain defining features of deconstruction can be noticed. For example, Derrida's entire enterprise is predicated upon the conviction that dualisms are irrevocably present in the various philosophers and artisans that he considers. While some philosophers argue that he is a little reductive when he talks about the Western philosophical tradition, it is his understanding of this tradition that informs and provides the tools for a deconstructive response. Because of this, it is worth briefly considering the target of Derridean deconstruction - the metaphysics of presence, or somewhat synonymously, logocentrism.



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Deconstruction must hence establish a methodology that pays close attention to these apparently contradictory imperatives (sameness and difference) and a reading of any Derridean text can only reaffirm this dual aspect.

### 7.2.1 Metaphysics of Presence/Logocentrism

There are many different terms that Derrida employs to describe what he considers to be the fundamental way(s) of thinking of the Western philosophical tradition. These include: logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and perhaps most famously, the metaphysics of presence, but also often simply 'metaphysics'. These terms all have slightly different meanings. Logocentrism emphasises the privileged role that logos, or speech, has been accorded in the Western tradition. Phallogocentrism points towards the patriarchal significance of this privileging. Derrida's enduring references to the metaphysics of presence borrows heavily from the work of Heidegger. Heidegger insists that Western philosophy has consistently privileged that which is, or that which appears, and has forgotten to pay any attention to the condition for that appearance. In other words, presence itself is privileged, rather than that which allows presence to be possible at all - and also impossible, for Derrida. All of these terms of denigration, however, are united under the broad rubric of the term 'metaphysics'. What, then, does Derrida mean by metaphysics?

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In the 'Afterword' to *Limited Inc.*, Derrida suggests that metaphysics can be defined as:

"The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent".

According to Derrida then, metaphysics involves installing hierarchies and orders of subordination in the various dualisms that it encounters. Moreover, metaphysical thought prioritises presence and purity at the expense of the contingent and the complicated, which are considered to be merely aberrations that are not important for philosophical analysis. Basically then, metaphysical thought always privileges one side of an opposition, and ignores or marginalises the alternative term of that opposition.

In another attempt to explain deconstruction's treatment of, and interest in oppositions, Derrida has suggested that: "An opposition of metaphysical concepts (speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to neutralisation: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practise an overturning of the classical opposition, and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticises" (M 195). In order to better understand this dual 'methodology' - that is also the deconstruction of the notion of a methodology because it no longer believes in the possibility of an observer being absolutely exterior to the object/text being examined - it is helpful to consider an example of this deconstruction at work.

## **7.3 Derrida's Early Works**

Derrida's terms change in every text that he writes. This is part of his deconstructive strategy. He focuses on particular themes or words in a text, which on account of their ambiguity undermine the more explicit intention of that text. It is not possible for all of these to be addressed (Derrida has published in the vicinity of 60 texts in English), so this article focused on some of the most pivotal terms and neologisms from his early thought. It addresses aspects of his later, more theme-based thought.

### **7.3.1 Speech/Writing**

The most prominent opposition with which Derrida's earlier work is concerned is that between speech and writing. According to Derrida, thinkers as different as Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss, have all denigrated the written word and valorised speech, by contrast, as some type of pure conduit of meaning. Their argument is that while spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, written words are the symbols of that already existing symbol. As representations of speech, they are doubly derivative and doubly far from a unity with one's own thought. Without going into detail regarding the ways in which these thinkers have set about justifying this type of hierarchical opposition, it is important to remember that the first strategy of deconstruction is to reverse existing oppositions. In *Of Grammatology* (perhaps his most famous work), Derrida hence attempts to illustrate that the structure of writing and grammatology are more important and even 'older' than the supposedly pure structure of presence-to-self that is characterised as typical of speech.

For example, in an entire chapter of his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure tries to restrict the science of linguistics to the phonetic and audible word only. In the course of his inquiry, Saussure goes as far as to argue that "language and writing are two distinct systems of signs: the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first". Language, Saussure insists,

has an oral tradition that is independent of writing, and it is this independence that makes a pure science of speech possible. Derrida vehemently disagrees with this hierarchy and instead argues that all that can be claimed of writing - eg. that it is derivative and merely refers to other signs - is equally true of speech. But as well as criticising such a position for certain unjustifiable presuppositions, including the idea that we are self-identical with ourselves in 'hearing' ourselves think, Derrida also makes explicit the manner in which such a hierarchy is rendered untenable from within Saussure's own text. Most famously, Saussure is the proponent of the thesis that is commonly referred to as "the arbitrariness of the sign", and this asserts, to simplify matters considerably, that the signifier bears no necessary relationship to that which is signified. Saussure derives numerous consequences from this position, but as Derrida points out, this notion of arbitrariness and of "unmotivated institutions" of signs, would seem to deny the possibility of any natural attachment. After all, if the sign is arbitrary and eschews any foundational reference to reality, it would seem that a certain type of sign (ie. the spoken) could not be more natural than another (ie. the written). However, it is precisely this idea of a natural attachment that Saussure relies upon to argue for our "natural bond" with sound, and his suggestion that sounds are more intimately related to our thoughts than the written word hence runs counter to his fundamental principle regarding the arbitrariness of the sign.

### 7.3.2 Arche-Writing

In *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere, Derrida argues that signification, broadly conceived, always refers to other signs, and that one can never reach a sign that refers only to itself. He suggests that "writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true" (OG 43), and this process of infinite referral, of never arriving at meaning itself, is the notion of 'writing' that he wants to emphasise. This is not writing narrowly conceived, as in a literal inscription upon a page, but what he terms 'arche-writing'. Arche-writing refers to a more generalised notion of writing that insists that the breach that the written introduces between what is intended to be conveyed and what is actually conveyed, is typical of an ordinary breach that afflicts everything one might wish to keep sacrosanct, including the notion of self-presence.

This ordinary breach that arche-writing refers to can be separated out to reveal two claims regarding spatial differing and temporal deferring. To explicate the first of these claims, Derrida's emphasis upon how writing differs from itself is simply to suggest that writing, and by extension all repetition, is split (differed) by the absence that makes it necessary. One example of this might be that we write something down because we may soon forget it, or to communicate something to someone who is not with us. According to Derrida, all writing, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the absence of every empirically determined addressee. Derrida also considers deferral to be typical of the written and this is to reinforce that the meaning of a certain text is never present, never entirely captured by a critic's attempt to pin it down. The meaning of a text is constantly subject to the whims of the future, but when that so-called future is itself 'present' (if we try and circumscribe the future by reference to a specific date or event) its meaning is equally not realised, but subject to yet another future that can also never be present. The key to a text is never even present to the author themselves, for the written always defers its meaning. As a consequence we cannot simply ask Derrida to explain exactly what he meant by propounding that enigmatic sentiment that has been translated as "there is nothing outside of the text". Any explanatory words that Derrida may offer would themselves require further explanation. [That said, it needs to be emphasised that Derrida's point is not so much that everything is simply semiotic or linguistic - as this is something that he explicitly denies - but that the processes of differing and deferring found within linguistic representation are symptomatic of a more general situation that afflicts everything, including the body and the perceptual]. So, Derrida's more generalised notion of writing, arche-writing, refers to the way in which the written is possible only on account of this 'ordinary' deferral of meaning that ensures that meaning can never be definitively present. In conjunction with the differing aspect that we have already seen him associate with, and then extend beyond the traditional confines of writing, he will come to describe these two overlapping processes via that most famous of neologisms: *différance*.

### 7.3.3 Différance

Différance is an attempt to conjoin the differing and deferring aspects involved in arche-writing in a term that itself plays upon the distinction between the audible and the written. After all, what differentiates *différance* and *différence* is inaudible, and this means that distinguishing between them actually requires the written. This problematises efforts like Saussure's, which as well as attempting to keep speech and writing apart, also suggest that writing is an almost unnecessary addition to speech. In response to such a claim, Derrida can simply point out that there is often, and perhaps even always, this type of ambiguity in the spoken word - *différence* as compared to *différance* - that demands reference to the written. If the spoken word requires the written to function properly, then the spoken is itself always at a distance from any supposed clarity of consciousness. It is this ordinary breach that Derrida associates with the terms arche-writing and *différance*.

Of course, *différance* cannot be exhaustively defined, and this is largely because of Derrida's insistence that it is "neither a word, nor a concept", as well as the fact that the meaning of the term changes depending upon the particular context in which it is being employed. For the moment, however, it suffices to suggest that according to Derrida, *différance* is typical of what is involved in arche-writing and this generalised notion of writing that breaks down the entire logic of the sign. The widespread conviction that the sign literally represents something, which even if not actually present, could be potentially present, is rendered impossible by arche-writing, which insists that signs always refer to yet more signs *ad infinitum*, and that there is no ultimate referent or foundation. This reversal of the subordinated term of an opposition accomplishes the first of deconstruction's dual strategic intents. Rather than being criticised for being derivative or secondary, for Derrida, writing, or at least the processes that characterise writing (ie. *différance* and arche-writing), are ubiquitous. Just as a piece of writing has no self-present subject to explain what every particular word means (and this ensures that what is written must partly elude any individual's attempt to control it), this is equally typical of the spoken. Utilising the same structure of repetition, nothing guarantees that another person will endow the words I use with the particular meaning that I attribute to them. Even the conception of an internal monologue and the idea that we can intimately 'hear' our own thoughts in a non-contingent way is misguided, as it ignores the way that arche-writing privileges difference and a non-coincidence with oneself.

### 7.3.4 Trace

In this respect, it needs to be pointed out that all of deconstruction's reversals (arche-writing included) are partly captured by the edifice that they seek to overthrow. For Derrida, "one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it", and it is important to recognise that the mere reversal of an existing metaphysical opposition might not also challenge the governing framework and presuppositions that are attempting to be reversed. Deconstruction hence cannot rest content with merely prioritising writing over speech, but must also accomplish the second major aspect of deconstruction's dual strategies, that being to corrupt and contaminate the opposition itself.

Derrida must highlight that the categories that sustain and safeguard any dualism are always already disrupted and displaced. To effect this second aspect of deconstruction's strategic intents, Derrida usually coins a new term, or reworks an old one, to permanently disrupt the structure into which he has intervened - examples of this include his discussion of the *pharmakon* in Plato (drug or tincture, salutary or maleficent), and the supplement in Rousseau, which will be considered towards the end of this section. To phrase the problem in slightly different terms, Derrida's argument is that in examining a binary opposition, deconstruction manages to expose a trace. This is not a trace of the oppositions that have since been deconstructed - on the contrary, the trace is a rupture within metaphysics, a pattern of incongruities where the metaphysical rubs up against the non-metaphysical, that it is deconstruction's job to juxtapose as best as it can. The trace does not appear as such, but the logic of its path in a text can be mimed by a deconstructive intervention and hence brought to the fore.



### 7.3.5 Supplement

Notes

The logic of the supplement is also an important aspect of *Of Grammatology*. A supplement is something that, allegedly secondarily, comes to serve as an aid to something 'original' or 'natural'. Writing is itself an example of this structure, for as Derrida points out, "if supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement par excellence since it proposes itself as the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant". Another example of the supplement might be masturbation, as Derrida suggests, or even the use of birth control precautions. What is notable about both of these examples is an ambiguity that ensures that what is supplementary can always be interpreted in two ways. For example, our society's use of birth control precautions might be interpreted as suggesting that our natural way is lacking and that the contraceptive pill, or condom, etc., hence replaces a fault in nature. On the other hand, it might also be argued that such precautions merely add on to, and enrich our natural way. It is always ambiguous, or more accurately 'undecidable', whether the supplement adds itself and "is a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence", or whether "the supplement supplements... adds only to replace... represents and makes an image... its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness". Ultimately, Derrida suggests that the supplement is both of these things, accretion and substitution, which means that the supplement is "not a signified more than a signifier, a representer than a presence, a writing than a speech". It comes before all such modalities.

This is not just some rhetorical suggestion that has no concrete significance in deconstruction. Indeed, while Rousseau consistently laments the frequency of his masturbation in his book, *The Confessions*, Derrida argues that "it has never been possible to desire the presence 'in person', before this play of substitution and the symbolic experience of auto-affection". By this, Derrida means that this supplementary masturbation that 'plays' between presence and absence (eg. the image of the absent Theories that is evoked by Rousseau) is that which allows us to conceive of being present and fulfilled in sexual relations with another at all. In a sense, masturbation is 'originary', and according to Derrida, this situation applies to all sexual relations. All erotic relations have their own supplementary aspect in which we are never present to some ephemeral 'meaning' of sexual relations, but always involved in some form of representation. Even if this does not literally take the form of imagining another in the place of, or supplementing the 'presence' that is currently with us, and even if we are not always acting out a certain role, or faking certain pleasures, for Derrida, such representations and images are the very conditions of desire and of enjoyment.

## 7.4 Time and Phenomenology

Derrida has had a long and complicated association with phenomenology for his entire career, including ambiguous relationships with Husserl and Heidegger, and something closer to a sustained allegiance with Lévinas. Despite this complexity, two main aspects of Derrida's thinking regarding phenomenology remain clear. Firstly, he thinks that the phenomenological emphasis upon the immediacy of experience is the new transcendental illusion, and secondly, he argues that despite its best intents, phenomenology cannot be anything other than a metaphysics. In this context, Derrida defines metaphysics as the science of presence, as for him, all metaphysics privileges presence, or that which is. While they are presented schematically here, these inter-related claims constitute Derrida's major arguments against phenomenology.

In various texts, Derrida contests this valorisation of an undivided subjectivity, as well as the primacy that such a position accords to the 'now', or to some other kind of temporal immediacy. For instance, in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida argues that if a 'now' moment is conceived of as exhausting itself in that experience, it could not actually be experienced, for there would be nothing to juxtapose itself against in order to illuminate that very 'now'. Instead, Derrida wants to reveal that every so-called 'present', or 'now' point, is always already compromised by a trace, or a residue of a previous experience, that precludes us ever being in a self-contained 'now' moment. Phenomenology is hence envisaged as nostalgically seeking the impossible: that is, coinciding



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with oneself in an immediate and pre-reflective spontaneity. Following this refutation of Husserlian temporality, Derrida remarks that "in the last analysis, what is at stake is... the privilege of the actual present, the now". Instead of emphasising the presence of a subject to themselves (i.e. the so-called living-present), Derrida strategically utilises a conception of time that emphasises deferral. John Caputo expresses Derrida's point succinctly when he claims that Derrida's criticisms of Husserlian temporality in *Speech and Phenomena* involve an attempt to convey that: "What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always 'to come'. Every time you try to stabilise the meaning of a thing, try to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away". To put Derrida's point simplistically, it might be suggested that the meaning of a particular object, or a particular word, is never stable, but always in the process of change (e.g. the dissemination of meaning for which deconstruction has become notorious). Moreover, the significance of that past change can only be appreciated from the future and, of course, that 'future' is itself implicated in a similar process of transformation were it ever to be capable of becoming 'present'. The future that Derrida is referring to is hence not just a future that will become present, but the future that makes all 'presence' possible and also impossible. For Derrida, there can be no presence-to-self, or self-contained identity, because the 'nature' of our temporal existence is for this type of experience to elude us. Our predominant mode of being is what he will eventually term the messianic, in that experience is about the wait, or more aptly, experience is only when it is deferred. Derrida's work offers many important temporal contributions of this quasi-transcendental variety.



*Did u know?* According to Derrida, phenomenology is a metaphysics of presence because it unwittingly relies upon the notion of an indivisible self-presence, or in the case of Husserl, the possibility of an exact internal adequation with oneself.

## 7.5 Undecidability

In its first and most famous instantiation, undecidability is one of Derrida's most important attempts to trouble dualisms, or more accurately, to reveal how they are always already troubled. An undecidable, and there are many of them in deconstruction (e.g. ghost, pharmakon, hymen, etc.), is something that cannot conform to either polarity of a dichotomy (e.g. present/absent, cure/poison, and inside/outside in the above examples). For example, the figure of a ghost seems to neither present or absent, or alternatively it is both present and absent at the same time (SM).

However, Derrida has a recurring tendency to resuscitate terms in different contexts, and the term undecidability also returns in later deconstruction. Indeed, to complicate matters, undecidability returns in two discernible forms. In his recent work, Derrida often insists that the condition of the possibility of mourning, giving, forgiving, and hospitality, to cite some of his most famous examples, is at once also the condition of their impossibility. In his explorations of these "possible-impossible" aporias, it becomes undecidable whether genuine giving, for example, is either a possible or an impossible ideal.

### 7.5.1 Decision

Derrida's later philosophy is also united by his analysis of a similar type of undecidability that is involved in the concept of the decision itself. In this respect, Derrida regularly suggests that a decision cannot be wise, or posed even more provocatively, that the instant of the decision must actually be mad. Drawing on Kierkegaard, Derrida tells us that a decision requires an undecidable leap beyond all prior preparations for that decision, and according to him, this applies to all decisions and not just those regarding the conversion to religious faith that preoccupies Kierkegaard. To pose the problem in inverse fashion, it might be suggested that for Derrida, all decisions are a faith and a tenuous faith at that, since were faith and the decision not tenuous, they would cease

to be a faith or a decision at all. This description of the decision as a moment of madness that must move beyond rationality and calculative reasoning may seem paradoxical, but it might nevertheless be agreed that a decision requires a 'leap of faith' beyond the sum total of the facts. Many of us are undoubtedly stifled by the difficulty of decision-making, and this psychological fact aids and, for his detractors, also abets Derrida's discussion of the decision as it appears in texts like *The Gift of Death*, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, and *Politics of Friendship*.

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, Derrida argues that a decision must always come back to the other, even if it is the other 'inside' the subject, and he disputes that an initiative which remained purely and simply "mine" would still be a decision. A theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision, because, as he rhetorically asks, "would we not be justified in seeing here the unfolding of an egological immanence, the autonomic and automatic deployment of predicates or possibilities proper to a subject, without the tearing rupture that should occur in every decision we call free?". In other words, if a decision is envisaged as simply following from certain character attributes, then it would not genuinely be a decision. Derrida is hence once more insisting upon the necessity of a leap beyond calculative reasoning, and beyond the resources of some self-contained subject reflecting upon the matter at hand. A decision must invoke that which is outside of the subject's control. If a decision is an example of a concept that is simultaneously impossible within its own internal logic and yet nevertheless necessary, then not only is our reticence to decide rendered philosophically cogent, but it is perhaps even privileged. Indeed, Derrida's work has been described as a "philosophy of hesitation", and his most famous neologism, *différance*, explicitly emphasises deferring, with all of the procrastination that this term implies. Moreover, in his early essay "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida also suggests that a successful deconstructive reading is conditional upon the suspension of choice: on hesitating between the ethical opening and the logocentric totality. Even though Derrida has suggested that he is reluctant to use the term 'ethics' because of logocentric associations, one is led to conclude that 'ethical' behaviour (for want of a better word) is a product of deferring, and of being forever open to possibilities rather than taking a definitive position. The problem of undecidability is also evident in more recent texts including *The Gift of Death*. In this text, Derrida seems to support the sacrificing of a certain notion of ethics and universality for a conception of radical singularity not unlike that evinced by the "hyper-ethical" sacrifice that Abraham makes of his son upon Mt Moriah, according to both the Judaic and Christian religions alike. To represent Derrida's position more precisely, true responsibility consists in oscillating between the demands of that which is wholly other (in Abraham's case, God, but also any particular other) and the more general demands of a community. Responsibility is enduring this trial of the undecidable decision, where attending to the call of a particular other will inevitably demand an estrangement from the "other others" and their communal needs. Whatever decision one may take, according to Derrida, it can never be wholly justified. Of course, Derrida's emphasis upon the undecidability inherent in all decision-making does not want to convey inactivity or a quietism of despair, and he has insisted that the madness of the decision also demands urgency and precipitation. Nevertheless, what is undergone is described as the "trial of undecidability" and what is involved in enduring this trial would seem to be a relatively anguished being. In an interview with Richard Beardsworth, Derrida characterises the problem of undecidability as follows: "However careful one is in the theoretical preparation of a decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the decision not know everything... the decision, if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated". This suggestion that the decision cannot anticipate the future is undoubtedly somewhat counter-intuitive, but Derrida's rejection of anticipation is not only a rejection of the traditional idea of deciding on the basis of weighing-up and internally representing certain options. By suggesting that anticipation is not possible, he means to make the more general point that no matter how we may anticipate any decision must always rupture those anticipatory frameworks. A decision must be fundamentally different from any prior preparations for it. As Derrida suggests in *Politics of Friendship*, the decision must "surprise the very subjectivity of the subject", and it is in making this leap away from calculative reasoning that Derrida argues that responsibility consists.

## **7.6. Derrida's Other Activities**

### **7.6.1 Responsibility to the Other**

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of Derrida's later philosophy is his advocacy of the *tout autre*, the wholly other, and *The Gift of Death* will be our main focus in explaining what this exaltation of the wholly other might mean. Any attempt to sum up this short but difficult text would have to involve the recognition of a certain incommensurability between the particular and the universal, and the dual demands placed upon anybody intending to behave responsibly. For Derrida, the paradox of responsible behaviour means that there is always a question of being responsible before a singular other (e.g. a loved one, God, etc.), and yet we are also always referred to our responsibility towards others generally and to what we share with them. Derrida insists that this type of aporia, or problem, is too often ignored by the "knights of responsibility" who presume that accountability and responsibility in all aspects of life - whether that be guilt before the human law, or even before the divine will of God - is quite easily established. These are the same people who insist that concrete ethical guidelines should be provided by any philosopher worth his or her 'salt' and who ignore the difficulties involved in a notion like responsibility, which demands something importantly different from merely behaving dutifully.

Derrida's exploration of Abraham's strange and paradoxical responsibility before the demands of God, which consists in sacrificing his only son Isaac, but also in betraying the ethical order through his silence about this act, is designed to problematise this type of ethical concern that exclusively locates responsibility in the realm of generality. In places, Derrida even verges on suggesting that this more common notion of responsibility, which insists that one should behave according to a general principle that is capable of being rationally validated and justified in the public realm, should be replaced with something closer to an Abrahamian individuality where the demands of a singular other (e.g. God) are importantly distinct from the ethical demands of our society. Derrida equivocates regarding just how far he wants to endorse such a conception of responsibility, and also on the entire issue of whether Abraham's willingness to murder is an act of faith, or simply an unforgivable transgression. As he says, "Abraham is at the same time, the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible". This equivocation is, of course, a defining trait of deconstruction, which has been variously pilloried and praised for this refusal to propound anything that the tradition could deem to be a thesis. Nevertheless, it is relatively clear that in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida intends to free us from the common assumption that responsibility is to be associated with behaviour that accords with general principles capable of justification in the public realm (i.e. liberalism). In opposition to such an account, he emphasises the "radical singularity" of the demands placed upon Abraham by God and those that might be placed on us by our own loved ones. Ethics, with its dependence upon generality, must be continually sacrificed as an inevitable aspect of the human condition and its aporetic demand to decide. As Derrida points out, in writing about one particular cause rather than another, in pursuing one profession over another, in spending time with one's family rather than at work, one inevitably ignores the "other others", and this is a condition of any and every existence. He argues that: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others". For Derrida, it seems that the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. He does, in fact, suggest that a universal community that excludes no one is a contradiction in terms. According to him, this is because: "I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it... What binds me to this one or that one, remains finally unjustifiable". Derrida hence implies that responsibility to any particular individual is only possible by being irresponsible to the "other others", that is, to the other people and possibilities that haunt any and every existence.

## 7.6.2 Wholly Other/Messianic

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This brings us to a term that Derrida has resuscitated from its association with Walter Benjamin and the Judaic tradition more generally. That term is the messianic and it relies upon a distinction with messianism.

According to Derrida, the term messianism refers predominantly to the religions of the Messiahs - i.e. the Muslim, Judaic and Christian religions. These religions proffer a Messiah of known characteristics, and often one who is expected to arrive at a particular time or place. The Messiah is inscribed in their respective religious texts and in an oral tradition that dictates that only if the other conforms to such and such a description is that person actually the Messiah. The most obvious of numerous necessary characteristics for the Messiah, it seems, is that they must invariably be male. Sexuality might seem to be a strange prerequisite to tether to that which is beyond this world, wholly other, but it is only one of many. Now, Derrida is not simplistically disparaging religion and the messianisms they propound. In an important respect, the messianic depends upon the various messianisms and Derrida admits that he cannot say which is the more originary. The messianism of Abraham in his singular responsibility before God, for Derrida, reveals the messianic structure of existence more generally, in that we all share a similar relationship to alterity even if we have not named and circumscribed that experience according to the template provided by a particular religion. However, Derrida's call to the wholly other, his invocation for the wholly other "to come", is not a call for a fixed or identifiable other of known characteristics, as is arguably the case in the average religious experience. His wholly other is indeterminable and can never actually arrive. Derrida more than once recounts a story of Maurice Blanchot's where the Messiah was actually at the gates to a city, disguised in rags. After some time, the Messiah was finally recognised by a beggar, but the beggar could think of nothing more relevant to ask than: "when will you come?". Even when the Messiah is 'there', he or she must still be yet to come, and this brings us back to the distinction between the messianic and the various historical messianisms. The messianic structure of existence is open to the coming of an entirely ungraspable and unknown other, but the concrete, historical messianisms are open to the coming of a specific other of known characteristics. The messianic refers predominantly to a structure of our existence that involves waiting - waiting even in activity - and a ceaseless openness towards a future that can never be circumscribed by the horizons of significance that we inevitably bring to bear upon that possible future. In other words, Derrida is not referring to a future that will one day become present (or a particular conception of the saviour who will arrive), but to an openness towards an unknown futurity that is necessarily involved in what we take to be 'presence' and hence also renders it 'impossible'. A deconstruction that entertained any type of grand prophetic narrative, like a Marxist story about the movement of history toward a pre-determined future which, once attained, would make notions like history and progress obsolete, would be yet another vestige of logocentrism and susceptible to deconstruction (SM). Precisely in order to avoid the problems that such messianisms engender - eg. killing in the name of progress, mutilating on account of knowing the will of God better than others, etc. - Derrida suggests that: "I am careful to say 'let it come' because if the other is precisely what is not invented, the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, in destabilising foreclosure structures, so as to allow for the passage toward the other".

## 7.7 Possible and Impossible Aporias

Derrida has recently become more and more preoccupied with what has come to be termed "possible-impossible aporias" - aporia was originally a Greek term meaning puzzle, but it has come to mean something more like an impasse or paradox. In particular, Derrida has described the paradoxes that afflict notions like giving, hospitality, forgiving and mourning. He argues that the condition of their possibility is also, and at once, the condition of their impossibility. In this section, I will attempt to reveal the shared logic upon which these aporias rely.

### 7.7.1 The Gift

The aporia that surrounds the gift revolves around the paradoxical thought that a genuine gift cannot actually be understood to be a gift. In his text, *Given Time* (GT), Derrida suggests that the notion of the gift contains an implicit demand that the genuine gift must reside outside of the oppositional demands of giving and taking, and beyond any mere self-interest or calculative reasoning (GT 30). According to him, however, a gift is also something that cannot appear as such (GD 29), as it is destroyed by anything that proposes equivalence or recompense, as well as by anything that even proposes to know of, or acknowledge it. This may sound counter-intuitive, but even a simple 'thank-you' for instance, which both acknowledges the presence of a gift and also proposes some form of equivalence with that gift, can be seen to annul the gift. By politely responding with a 'thank-you', there is often, and perhaps even always, a presumption that because of this acknowledgement one is no longer indebted to the other who has given, and that nothing more can be expected of an individual who has so responded. Significantly, the gift is hence drawn into the cycle of giving and taking, where a good deed must be accompanied by a suitably just response. As the gift is associated with a command to respond, it becomes an imposition for the receiver, and it even becomes an opportunity to take for the 'giver', who might give just to receive the acknowledgement from the other that they have in fact given. There are undoubtedly many other examples of how the 'gift' can be deployed, and not necessarily deliberately, to gain advantage. Of course, it might be objected that even if it is psychologically difficult to give without also receiving (and in a manner that is tantamount to taking) this does not in-itself constitute a refutation of the logic of genuine giving. According to Derrida, however, his discussion does not amount merely to an empirical or psychological claim about the difficulty of transcending an immature and egocentric conception of giving. On the contrary, he wants to problematise the very possibility of a giving that can be unequivocally disassociated from receiving and taking.

The important point is that, for Derrida, a genuine gift requires an anonymity of the giver, such that there is no accrued benefit in giving. The giver cannot even recognise that they are giving, for that would be to reabsorb their gift to the other person as some kind of testimony to the worth of the self - i.e. the kind of self-congratulatory logic that rhetorically poses the question "how wonderful I am to give this person that which they have always desired, and without even letting them know that I am responsible?". This is an extreme example, but Derrida claims that such a predicament afflicts all giving in more or less obvious ways. For him, the logic of a genuine gift actually requires that self and other be radically disparate, and have no obligations or claims upon each other of any kind. He argues that a genuine gift must involve neither an apprehension of a good deed done, nor the recognition by the other party that they have received, and this seems to render the actuality of any gift an impossibility. Significantly, however, according to Derrida, the existential force of this demand for an absolute altruism can never be assuaged, and yet equally clearly it can also never be fulfilled, and this ensures that the condition of the possibility of the gift is inextricably associated with its impossibility. For Derrida, there is no solution to this type of problem, and no hint of a dialectic that might unify the apparent incommensurability in which possibility implies impossibility and vice versa. At the same time, however, he does not intend simply to vacillate in hyperbolic and self-referential paradoxes. There is a sense in which deconstruction actually seeks genuine giving, hospitality, forgiving and mourning, even where it acknowledges that these concepts are forever elusive and can never actually be fulfilled.

### 7.7.2 Hospitality

It is also worth considering the aporia that Derrida associates with hospitality. According to Derrida, genuine hospitality before any number of unknown others is not, strictly speaking, a possible scenario. If we contemplate giving up everything that we seek to possess and call our own, then most of us can empathise with just how difficult enacting any absolute hospitality would be. Despite this, however, Derrida insists that the whole idea of hospitality depends upon



such an altruistic concept and is inconceivable without it. In fact, he argues that it is this internal tension that keeps the concept alive.

As Derrida makes explicit, there is a more existential example of this tension, in that the notion of hospitality requires one to be the 'master' of the house, country or nation (and hence controlling). His point is relatively simple here; to be hospitable, it is first necessary that one must have the power to host. Hospitality hence makes claims to property ownership and it also partakes in the desire to establish a form of self-identity. Secondly, there is the further point that in order to be hospitable, the host must also have some kind of control over the people who are being hosted. This is because if the guests take over a house through force, then the host is no longer being hospitable towards them precisely because they are no longer in control of the situation. This means, for Derrida, that any attempt to behave hospitably is also always partly betrothed to the keeping of guests under control, to the closing of boundaries, to nationalism, and even to the exclusion of particular groups or ethnicities. This is Derrida's 'possible' conception of hospitality, in which our most well-intentioned conceptions of hospitality render the "other others" as strangers and refugees. Whether one invokes the current international preoccupation with border control, or simply the ubiquitous suburban fence and alarm system, it seems that hospitality always posits some kind of limit upon where the other can trespass, and hence has a tendency to be rather inhospitable. On the other hand, as well as demanding some kind of mastery of house, country or nation, there is a sense in which the notion of hospitality demands a welcoming of whomever, or whatever, may be in need of that hospitality. It follows from this that unconditional hospitality, or we might say 'impossible' hospitality, hence involves a relinquishing of judgement and control in regard to who will receive that hospitality. In other words, hospitality also requires non-mastery, and the abandoning of all claims to property, or ownership. If that is the case, however, the ongoing possibility of hospitality thereby becomes circumvented, as there is no longer the possibility of hosting anyone, as again, there is no ownership or control.

### 7.7.3 Forgiveness

Derrida discerns another aporia in regard to whether or not to forgive somebody who has caused us significant suffering or pain. This particular paradox revolves around the premise that if one forgives something that is actually forgivable, then one simply engages in calculative reasoning and hence does not really forgive. Most commonly in interviews, but also in his recent text *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Derrida argues that according to its own internal logic, genuine forgiving must involve the impossible: that is, the forgiving of an 'unforgivable' transgression - eg. a 'mortal sin'. There is hence a sense in which forgiving must be 'mad' and 'unconscious', and it must also remain outside of, or heterogenous to, political and juridical rationality. This unconditional 'forgiveness' explicitly precludes the necessity of an apology or repentance by the guilty party, although Derrida acknowledges that this pure notion of forgiveness must always exist in tension with a more conditional forgiveness where apologies are actually demanded. However, he argues that this conditional forgiveness amounts more to amnesty and reconciliation than to genuine forgiveness. The pattern of this discussion is undoubtedly beginning to become familiar. Derrida's discussions of forgiving are orientated around revealing a fundamental paradox that ensures that forgiving can never be finished or concluded - it must always be open, like a permanent rupture, or a wound that refuses to heal.

This forgiveness paradox depends, in one of its dual aspects, upon a radical disjunction between self and other. Derrida explicitly states that "genuine forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty and the victim. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of forgiveness in the strict sense". Given that he also acknowledges that it is difficult to conceive of any such face-to-face encounter without a third party - as language itself must serve such a mediating function - forgiveness is caught in an aporia that ensures that its empirical actuality looks to be decidedly unlikely. To recapitulate, the reason that Derrida's notion of forgiveness is caught in such an inextricable paradox is because absolute



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forgiveness requires a radically singular confrontation between self and other, while conditional forgiveness requires the breaching of categories such as self and other, either by a mediating party, or simply by the recognition of the ways in which we are always already intertwined with the other. Indeed, Derrida explicitly argues that when we know anything of the other, or even understand their motivation in however minimal a way, this absolute forgiveness can no longer take place. Derrida can offer no resolution in regard to the impasse that obtains between these two notions (between possible and impossible forgiving, between an amnesty where apologies are asked for and a more absolute forgiveness). He will only insist that an oscillation between both sides of the aporia is necessary for responsibility.

#### 7.7.4 Mourning

In *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, which was written almost immediately following de Man's death in 1983, Derrida reflects upon the political significance of his colleague's apparent Nazi affiliation in his youth, and he also discusses the pain of losing his friend. Derrida's argument about mourning adheres to a similarly paradoxical logic to that which has been associated with him throughout this article. He suggests that the so-called 'successful' mourning of the deceased other actually fails - or at least is an unfaithful fidelity - because the other person becomes a part of us, and in this interiorisation their genuine alterity is no longer respected. On the other hand, failure to mourn the other's death paradoxically appears to succeed, because the presence of the other person in their exteriority is prolonged. As Derrida suggests, there is a sense in which "an aborted interiorisation is at the same time a respect for the other as other". Hence the possibility of an impossible bereavement, where the only possible way to mourn, is to be unable to do so. However, even though this is how he initially presents the problem, Derrida also problematises this "success fails, failure succeeds" formulation.

In his essay "Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok", Derrida again considers two models of the type of encroachment between self and other that is regularly associated with mourning. Borrowing from post-Freudian theories of mourning, he posits (although later undermines) a difference between introjection, which is love for the other in me, and incorporation, which involves retaining the other as a pocket, or a foreign body within one's own body. For Freud, as well as for the psychologists Abraham and Torok whose work Derrida considers, successful mourning is primarily about the introjection of the other. The preservation of a discrete and separate other person inside the self (psychologically speaking), as is the case in incorporation, is considered to be where mourning ceases to be a 'normal' response and instead becomes pathological. Typically, Derrida reverses this hierarchy by highlighting that there is a sense in which the supposedly pathological condition of incorporation is actually more respectful of the other person's alterity. After all, incorporation means that one has not totally assimilated the other, as there is still a difference and a heterogeneity. On the other hand, Abraham and Torok's so-called 'normal' mourning can be accused of interiorising the other person to such a degree that they have become assimilated and even metaphorically cannibalised. Derrida considers this introjection to be an infidelity to the other. However, Derrida's account is not so simple as to unreservedly valorise the incorporation of the other person, even if he emphasises this paradigm in an effort to refute the canonical interpretation of successful mourning. He also acknowledges that the more the self "keeps the foreign element inside itself, the more it excludes it". If we refuse to engage with the dead other, we also exclude their foreignness from ourselves and hence prevent any transformative interaction with them. When fetishised in their externality in such a manner, the dead other really is lifeless and it is significant that Derrida describes the death of de Man in terms of the loss of exchange and of the transformational opportunities that he presented. Derrida's point hence seems to be that in mourning, the 'otherness of the other' person resists both the process of incorporation as well as the process of introjection. The other can neither be preserved as a foreign entity, nor introjected fully within. Towards the end of *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, Derrida suggests that responsibility towards the other is about respecting and even emphasising this resistance.

**Self-Assessment**

Notes

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Jacques Derrida belongs to ..... philosophers.  
 (a) 18th century (b) 19th century  
 (c) 20th century (d) None of these
- (ii) Derrida was born into a Jewish family in Algiers in ..... .  
 (a) 1935 (b) 1931  
 (c) 1339 (d) 1930
- (iii) In 'memoires: for Paul de Man' was written in ..... .  
 (a) 1983 (b) 1980  
 (c) 1965 (d) None of these
- (iv) Derrida was awarded an honorary doctorate at Cambridge in ..... .  
 (a) 1992 (b) 1990  
 (c) 1983 (d) None of these

**7.8 Summary**

- Derrida was also born into an environment of some discrimination. In fact, he either withdrew from, or was forced out of at least two schools during his childhood simply on account of being Jewish. He was expelled from one school because there was a 7% limit on the Jewish population, and he later withdrew from another school on account of the anti-semitism.
- Derrida's initial work in philosophy was largely phenomenological, and his early training as a philosopher was done largely through the lens of Husserl. Other important inspirations on his early thought include Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure, Levinas and Freud. Derrida acknowledges his indebtedness to all of these thinkers in the development of his approach to texts, which has come to be known as 'deconstruction'.
- Derrida, like many other contemporary European theorists, is preoccupied with undermining the oppositional tendencies that have befallen much of the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, dualisms are the staple diet of deconstruction, for without these hierarchies and orders of subordination it would be left with nowhere to intervene.
- Derrida's early and late work is merely the most obvious example of the difficulties involved in suggesting "deconstruction says this", or "deconstruction prohibits that".
- There are many different terms that Derrida employs to describe what he considers to be the fundamental way(s) of thinking of the Western philosophical tradition. These include: logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and perhaps most famously, the metaphysics of presence, but also often simply 'metaphysics'.
- Derrida has had a long and complicated association with phenomenology for his entire career, including ambiguous relationships with Husserl and Heidegger, and something closer to a sustained allegiance with Lévinas. Despite this complexity, two main aspects of Derrida's thinking regarding phenomenology remain clear.
- However, Derrida has a recurring tendency to resuscitate terms in different contexts, and the term undecidability also returns in later deconstruction. Indeed, to complicate matters, undecidability returns in two discernible forms. In his recent work, Derrida often insists that the condition of the possibility of mourning, giving, forgiving, and hospitality, to cite some of his most famous examples, is at once also the condition of their impossibility. In his explorations of these "possible-impossible" aporias, it becomes undecidable whether genuine giving, for example, is either a possible or an impossible ideal.
- Derrida has recently become more and more preoccupied with what has come to be termed "possible-impossible aporias" - aporia was originally a Greek term meaning puzzle, but it has come to mean something more like an impasse or paradox.

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- Derrida discerns another aporia in regard to whether or not to forgive somebody who has caused us significant suffering or pain. This particular paradox revolves around the premise that if one forgives something that is actually forgivable, then one simply engages in calculative reasoning and hence does not really forgive.

### 7.9 Key-Words

1. Episteme : Knowledge/system of thought
2. Arche : Origin/beginning/foundation/source
3. Telos : End/ goal/destiny

### 7.10 Review Questions

1. Discuss Derrida's time and phenomenology.
2. Write a short note on the life and works of Derrida.
3. Explain Derrida's deconstruction.
4. What do you mean by Logocentrism? Discuss.
5. What does Derrida mean by 'supplementarity'?
6. Which thinkers have inaugurated 'deconstructive discourse'?

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (c)                      (ii) (d)                      (iii) (a)                      (iv) (a)

### 7.11 Further Readings



Books

1. Acts of Literature, ed. Attridge, New York: Routledge, 1992 (AL).
2. Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas, trans. Brault & Naas, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999 (AEL).
3. Circumfessions: Fifty Nine Periphrases, in Bennington, G., Jacques Derrida, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 (Circ).
4. On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, London: Routledge, 2001 (OCF).
5. Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice, (inc. "Force of the Law"), eds. Cornell, Carlson, & Benjamin, New York: Routledge, 1992 (DPJ).
6. Dissemination, trans. Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 (D).
7. "'Eating Well' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in Who Comes After the Subject? eds. Cadava, Connor, & Nancy, New York: Routledge, 1991, p 96-119.
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## Unit 8: Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' – Jacques Derrida: Detailed Study

Notes

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences.
- Explain Derrida's Essays.

### Introduction

This essay briefly introduces and discusses Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences". It contains short sections dealing with the key concepts treated in Derrida's essay, but the emphasis is on the author's characteristic protocols of re-reading and deconstructing primary texts. Ideas and methods introduced by Derrida are listed rather than elaborated on.

### 8.1 Essay of Derrida

#### **Derrida's essay divides into two parts:**

1. "The structurality of structure": An examination of the shifting relationships between structure and centre, and their implications. The results of this examination is roughly the following: whereas traditionally, a structure was conceived of as grounded and stabilised by a moment of presence called the centre, we are now at a time when that centring has been called into question. And to call the centre into question is to open up a can of worms, destabilising and calling into question the most basic building blocks of thought (Idea, origin, God, man etc.).
2. An analysis of Levi-Straussian structuralism as an instantiation of the problems of thinking through the relationship between structure and centre. The basic point here comes at the end of the essay, and can be stated in one sentence Whereas Levi-Straussian structuralism posits itself as a decentring, it re-creates the centre in a particular way: as the loss of a centre. In other words, how one decentres matters; and there is, above all, a crucial difference between conceiving a structure as simply being acentric (of just not having a centre) and between conceiving of a structure as being acentric because it has lost a centre it once had. It is precisely these two forms of decentering that are in perpetual tension in Levi-Strauss' work. And, in the final analysis, his "centres" itself upon the very loss of the centre it aims at: absence becomes a mode of presence. So, let me go through each of these parts in some more detail.

## 8.2 Part One

### 1. Ante-structuralism:

- (i) "structure...has always been neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin": all structures or systems oriented themselves through a centre, a moment at which the substitution of elements ceased, something that fixed or held the structure in place. For example, God in the medieval feudal hierarchy, the king on a chess board, the anterior mental image which the word represents. The centre was conceived as providing in a sense the reason deter of the structure, that which legitimised it, that to which everything could ultimately be referred, that which lent the system its closure. And, further, this centre was associated with the fullness of presence, of being, of positivity, of essence, of being something.
- (ii) Yet, there was always something of a paradox here: since the centre needed to be both in the structure (part of it), and yet outside (somehow exceptional, something that did not quite obey the rules that all other elements of the structure were subject to). The history of the concept of structure can be read as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, of a chain of determinations of the centre (in terms of being/presence/fullness/positivity)--- Plato's ideas, Aristotle's telos, Descartes' ego, Kant' transcendental "I, Hegel's absolute spirit; these would all exemplify different ways of describing or determining the centre through which the philosophical structure gained its coherence.

A moment of direct relevance to us in this regard will be Foucault's essay "What is an Author?". What Foucault does there is to shift the problem of what an author is to the question of the cultural anxiety that is implied by the desire to be able to fix the author. For what "authorial intention" provides is precisely a centre, a point of origin, a presence to which the question "what does it mean?" can be referred. And thus far we have seen a relay of such centerings: against the background that "authorial intention" allows us to fix meaning, New Criticism insisted that the "closure of the text" fixes meaning; against both these, Fish initially argues that the "reader" fixes meaning. In each case the structure of meaning grounds itself upon a centre that is seen as being a point of presence, of being, of essence: "author", "text," "reader." And from another angle, Foucault's essay does what Derrida's does: decentres the centre.

### 2. Then there was structuralism (and its own antecedents/co-cedents, Freud/Nietzsche):

Structuralism would seem to be the antithesis of these earlier, essentialist, presentist ways of thinking, in that it insists that elements of a structure have no positive essence, no being, but are simply the effects of sets of differential relationships (cf. Saussure's notion that there are no positivities, only differential relationships out of which what look like positive entities emerge). One consequence of this is that Structuralism re-construes the centre not as something that precedes the structure, not as that which is somehow anterior to and the basis of the structure; rather, structuralism basically rethinks the centre as an effect of the structure. The centre was not simply there, and thus should not be thought of on the basis of presence. This moment is what Derrida calls the decentering ,which occurs when one thinks through the structurality of the structure, thinks through what makes a structure a structure. Levi-Strauss? notion of myth is a good example: the "core" of myth, that is, the set of oppositions constituting that deep structure doesn't really exist in the world---it is simply the retroactive point of reference constituted by the differential relationships among the different verisons. These are different "versions" of the myth not because there was some basic mythic structure out of which they all grew, but because, through the development of the individual, related stories, a virtual object emerged (like extending backwards the rays reflected from a mirror to construct the virtual image---not a brilliant analogy but along the right lines).

### 3. Structuralism and its discontents:

So, structuralism advocates acentricity, refuses the positivity of the centre that had so long been thought essential to the very idea of a structure. But does it succeed, or is it another one

of those "series of substitutions of center for center," another in the line, for example, of "authorial intention," "text," "reader," and so on. The answer is going to be yes and no---it succeeds partway but doesn't ultimately come to grips with the radical implications of decentering, and thereby ends up being another substitution for the centre it claimed to be doing away with. For, Derrida argues, even the most radical attempts to think through the absence of the centre, to decentre the centre, remain trapped in a circle, which takes the form "of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics."

That is, in order to attack centred structures, one has to make use of concepts that come from them, and in so doing one resurrects these, gives them validity, at the very moment at which one makes use of them.

And this is inescapable. There is ultimately no outside where we can stand, where we can centre ourselves to critique metaphysics; because its conceptual assumptions run so deep we are always caught in them, always part of the game. The most basic concepts we use to try and topple the structures come from these very structures, and thus we give them back their power at the very moment we are striving to deprive them of it. Now, there are always kinds of questions that need not confront the problem of what underpins them (large areas of physics, e.g., can simply take nature as given, objects as occupying a defined spatial and temporal place), but this simply means that the metaphysical centres have been assumed in the very demarcation of the field (thus, the field of Newtonian physics, e.g. builds into its frame the very assumptions that quantum mechanics later renders unstable---and the theological dimension of this was manifest in Newton, who insisted, for example, on absolute space rather than relative space on essentially theological grounds).

But there are nonetheless different ways of being "caught in the game" and these are not the same, and do not have the same consequences. And through the exemplary case of Levi-Strauss, Derrida (1) addresses this problem of decentering existing conceptual and ideational frameworks while having to rely on the ideas and concepts that constitute them, and (2) examines specifically the implications of how one decenters them, what difference the way in which one enters the circle makes.

### 8.3 Part Two

Rather than to try and follow through this section step by step, I think it will become clearer if we abandon that attempt and reverse course, starting from near the end of the essay. Specifically, the paragraph, which I quote extracts from:

"As a turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilty Rousseauistic facet of thinking the free play of which the Nietzschean affirmation...would be the other side. This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of centre." If there is a thesis that Derrida proposes regarding Levi-Strauss, this is about as close as you are going to get. The basic point is that there are two opposed ways of approaching structures without centres: as acentric or non-centered or as something that once had a centre, but no longer does. And in the case of the latter, that moment of anterior presence, of fullness (that is now absent) haunts the decentered structure, and thus remains present as it were, precisely in the form of an absence . This present absence re-centres the structure at the very moment at which it is claimed that the structure has no centre.

This basic critique also underpins Derrida's remarks on the structuralist "neutralisation of time and history". On the one hand, by "reducing" history, by bracketing it off, Levi-Strauss (rightly) undermines the link between history and the metaphysics of presence (exposes futility of a search for the historical origin, for example).

Let me set aside the question of what "affirmation" of acentricity and free play would look like (Derrida doesn't himself answer this question, except to acknowledge the problem that such an affirmation could itself be seen as constituting yet another centre). Instead, we need to see that Derrida's reading of Levi-Strauss repeatedly emphasises the basic tension/contradiction between



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the claim towards acentricity or non-centricity, on the one hand, and the "supplementary" move whereby acentricity will be re-thought as the loss of a centre. And this unresolved problem constitutes the thread that connects the series of binary oppositions raised in Levi-Strauss: Nature/Culture; Truth/Method; Engineer/Bricoleur etc.

Nature/Culture: Let us, for example, consider the Nature/Culture opposition. Levi-Strauss begins his own discussion by telling us that despite attempts to repudiate this distinction, it has been impossible to avoid it (Elementary Structures). And he goes on to give this opposition "a more valid interpretation" in terms of norm and universality. But no sooner has he done so, he encounters the "fact" which is "not far removed from a scandal": the incest prohibition, which inextricably mixes up the two poles of nature (universality) and culture (society-specific rules or norms). His solution to this problem will be, as we have seen, to claim that the incest prohibition needs to be thought as the "join" between nature and culture for it is through and in the prohibition that culture emerges as different from but linked to nature.

Derrida points out, first, that incest is only scandalous if one is already working with the nature/culture opposition (that is, in the interior of the system). That is, only when one treats the nature/culture difference as in some sense self-evident, can the "fact" of incest prohibition appear to be that which blurs or obliterates the difference. Otherwise, it is not scandalous at all: simply something that escapes that conceptual distinction, which that particular distinction is not capable of dealing with (and in this sense it points to something unthinkable within a particular conceptual system, suggesting even that such unthinkability is not merely accidental but constitutive of the system itself).

Rather than using this "fact" to question in depth the history of the nature/culture opposition, L-S takes a different tack: of radically separating method from truth. He holds on to the old concepts in the field of empirical discovery, while exposing their limits here and there, uses them as instruments even as he criticises their truth value. This approach is "bricolage" and he proffers himself as bricoleur, constrained by the empirical world to operate in a way that is opposed to the mode of an engineer (who can define his terms right down to their very essence). Consider, then, the problem of the bricoleur versus the engineer, or of method versus truth. On the one hand, the bricoleur represents for Levi-Strauss "the discourse of the method," that is, he is the one who takes up whatever concepts are at hand (nature and culture, for example), without worrying about their truth, and uses them to build and dismantle systems. Bricolage exemplifies for Levi-Strauss a discourse about structure that abandons all reference to a grounding centre. Derrida argues that the notion of the bricoleur depends for its force on what it opposes itself to: the engineer (and the notion of truth he embodies). But once we recognise that there is no engineer, that every finite discourse depends on bricolage, then the very notion of a bricoleur is "menaced".

There is a further consequence of Levi-Strauss' approach that comes from the entanglement of his own critical discourse with the object it studies. This comes out most clearly in his discussion of myth. For one, his empirical approach to myth embodies powerfully the idea of bricolage: there is no "central" mythic structure or origin upon which his analysis depends. It claims to be acentric, operating by trial and error. Thus, the reference myth he uses is not privileged, but in a sense arbitrarily chosen (he could have picked another one). Likewise, there is no single, absolute source for the myth. And for this reason, Levi-Strauss goes on to say that discourse on myth (that is, his own book) must follow the form of myth itself; it cannot---like the engineer---make his theory of myth as relational into the "truth"; rather, the structuralist analysis must acknowledge and reflect mirage-like quality, the acentricity, of its object (myth). [To cite Levi-Strauss: "unlike philosophical reflection, which claims to go all the way back to its source...my enterprise...has had to yield to [the] demands [of myth].... Thus is this book, on myths itself and in its own way, a myth".] This insistence on the acentricity of myth ("the stated abandonment of all reference to a centre") and the claim that structuralist reading of myth is also myth-like in not having a centre is what Derrida reconstructs.

But the consequence of this is also that it provides no way of distinguishing between the different (structuralist) readings of myth, since all them become somehow equivalent. It sidesteps the question of the standpoint from which one would be able to compare the "truth values" of different discourses

on myth. Hence a peculiar tension in L-S's work between a critique of empiricism (structuralism claims to go beyond the manifest diversity to modes of underlying regularity) and the fact that his work always claims to be empirical (dependent on new information). So that structures underwrite experience (are "prior" to experience) and yet are always dependent upon experience: you never reach the structure in a sense. Hence too the ambiguity of his response to the demand for "totalisation": it is a meaningless requirement because it is impossible (because the empirical field is too vast) and because it is unnecessary (you don't need to enumerate all instances to elaborate the structure).

However, another way of conceiving totalisation would not be based upon thinking of it in terms of an empirical impossibility but because of a "structural" feature of the discourse itself: because of a lack that allows for an infinite circulation within a closed structure.

And by the same token, the idea of "truth" (the discourse of the engineer) turns out itself to be simply a lost ideal, an historical illusion, which we can never have, but which is necessary for this notion of "acentricity" to take hold. What Levi-Strauss' theory of bricolage and method evokes in seeing these as exemplifying "acentricity" is an ideal image of a discourse of pure truth and self-sufficiency, that of the engineer or scientist who would "be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax and lexicon," who would represent the purity of a meaning present to itself. It evokes this ideal image as something lost, something that no longer exists, and precisely through this loss the discourse of method/bricolage stabilises itself. There is, in other words, a buried, unacknowledged tension in Levi-Strauss' own descriptions between the upholding of an acentric structure of differences (exemplified by bricolage) and the hankering after an idealised, mythic lost presence (the engineer, epistemic discourse) whose absence is what leads to acentricity. It is in the shadow of loss that the bricoleur operates, elevating thereby that loss itself to the level of the centre.

#### **8.4 Text-Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"**

Jacques Derrida first read his paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences (1966)" at the John Hopkins International Colloquium on "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" in October 1966 articulating for the first time a post structuralist theoretical paradigm. This conference was described by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donata to be "the first time in United States when structuralism had been thought of as an interdisciplinary phenomenon". However, even before the conclusion of the conference there were clear signs that the ruling trans-disciplinary paradigm of structuralism had been superseded, by the importance of Derrida's "radical appraisals of our assumptions"

Derrida begins the essay by referring to 'an event' which has 'perhaps' occurred in the history of the concept of structure, that is also a 'redoubling'. The event which the essay documents is that of a definitive epistemological break with structuralist thought, of the ushering in of post-structuralism as a movement critically engaging with structuralism and also with traditional humanism and empiricism. It turns the logic of structuralism against itself insisting that the "structurality of structure" itself had been repressed in structuralism.

Derrida starts this essay by putting into question the basic metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato which has always principally positioned itself with a fixed immutable centre, a static presence. The notion of structure, even in structuralist theory has always presupposed a centre of meaning of sorts. Derrida terms this desire for a centre as "logocentrism" in his seminal work "Of Grammatology (1966)". 'Logos', is a Greek word for 'word' which carries the greatest possible concentration of presence.

As Terry Eagleton explains in "Literary Theory: An Introduction (1996)", "Western Philosophy.... has also been in a broader sense, 'logocentric', committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word', presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation for all our thought, language and experience. It has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others, - 'the transcendental signifier' - and for the anchoring, unquestioning meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (the transcendental signified)."

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Derrida argues that this centre thereby limits the "free play that it makes possible", as it stands outside it, is axiomatic - "the Centre is not really the centre". Under a centered structure, free play is based on a fundamental ground of the immobility and indisputability of the centre, on what Derrida refers to "as the metaphysics of presence". Derrida's critique of structuralism bases itself on this idea of a center. A structure assumes a centre which orders the structure and gives meanings to its components, and the permissible interactions between them, i.e. limits play. Derrida in his critique looks at structures diachronically, i.e., historically, and synchronically, i.e. as a freeze frame at a particular juncture. Synchronically, the centre cannot be substituted: "It is the point at which substitution of contents, elements and terms is no longer possible." (Structuralism thus stands in tension with history as Derrida argues towards the end of the essay.) But historically, one centre gets substituted for another to form an epistemological shift: "the entire history of the concept of structure must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center." Thus, at a given point of time, the centre of the structure cannot be substituted by other elements, but historically, the point that defines play within a structure has changed. The history of human sciences has thereby been a process of substitution, replacement and transformation of this centre through which all meaning is to be sought - God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Renaissance Man, the Self, substance, matter, Family, Democracy, Independence, Authority and so on. Since each of these concepts is to found our whole system of thought and language, it must itself be beyond that system, untainted by its play of linguistic differences. It cannot be implicated in the very languages and system it attempts to order and anchor: it must be somehow anterior to these discourses. The problem of centers for Derrida was thereby that they attempt to exclude. In doing so, they ignore, repress or marginalize others (which become the Other). This longing for centers spawns binary opposites, with one term of the opposition central and the other marginal. Terry Eagleton calls these binary opposition with which classical structuralism tends to function as a way of seeing typical of ideologies, which thereby becomes exclusionary. To quote him, "Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not".

Derrida insists that with the 'rupture' it has become "necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus....a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play." Derrida attributes this initiation of the process of decentering "to the totality of our era". As Peter Barry argues in "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural (1995)" that in the twentieth century, through a complex process of various historico-political events, scientific and technological shifts, "these centers were destroyed or eroded". For instance, the First World War destroyed the illusion of steady material progress; the Holocaust destroyed the notion of Europe as the source and centre of human civilization. Scientific discoveries - such as the way the notion of relativity destroyed the ideas of time and space as fixed and central absolutes. Then there were intellectual and artistic movements like modernism in the arts which in the first thirty years of the century rejected such central absolutes as harmony in music, chronological sequence in narrative, and the representation of the visual world in art. This 'decentering' of structure, of the 'transcendental signified' and of the sovereign subject, Derrida suggests - naming his sources of inspiration - can be found in the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, and especially of the concepts of Being and Truth, in the Freudian critique of self-presence, as he says, "a critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity, and of the self-proximity or self-possession", and more radically in the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics, "of the determination of Being as Presence".

Derrida argues that all these attempts at 'decentering' were however, "trapped in a sort of circle". Structuralism, which in his day was taken as a profound questioning of traditional Western thought, is taken by Derrida to be in support of just those ways of thought. This is true, according to deconstructive thought, for almost all critique of Western thought that arises from within western thought: it would inevitably be bound up with that which it questions - "We have no language-no syntax and no lexicon-which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely

what it seeks to contest." Semiotics and Phenomenology are similarly compromised. Semiotics stresses the fundamental connection of language to speech in a way that it undermines its insistence on the inherently arbitrary nature of sign. Phenomenology rejects metaphysical truths in the favor of phenomena and appearance, only to insist for truth to be discovered in human consciousness and lived experience. To an extent Derrida seems to see this as inevitable, "There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics"; however, the awareness of this process is important for him - "Here it is a question of a critical relationship to the language of the human sciences and a question of a critical responsibility of the discourse. It is a question of putting expressly and systematically the problem of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary of that heritage itself." It is important to note that Derrida does not assert the possibility of thinking outside such terms; any attempt to undo a particular concept is likely to become caught up in the terms which the concept depends on. For instance: if we try to undo the centering concept of 'consciousness' by asserting the disruptive counterforce of the 'unconscious', we are in danger of introducing a new center. All we can do is refuse to allow either pole in a system to become the center and guarantor of presence.

In validate this argument, Derrida takes up the example of Saussure's description of sign. In Saussure, the 'metaphysics of presence' is affirmed by his insistence on the fact that a sign has two components - the signifier and the signified, the signified which the mental and psychological. This would imply that the meaning of a sign is present to the speaker when he uses in, in defiance of the fact that meaning is constituted by a system of differences. That is also why Saussure insists on the primacy of speaking. As soon as language is written down, a distance between the subject and his words is created, causing meaning to become unanchored. Derrida however critiques this 'phonocentrism' and argues that the distance between the subject and his words exist in any case, even while speaking - that the meaning of sign is always unanchored. Sign has no innate or transcendental truth. Thus, the signified never has any immediate self-present meaning. It is itself only a sign that derives its meaning from other signs. Hence a signified can be a signifier and vice versa. Such a viewpoint entails that sign thus be stripped off its signified component. Meaning is never present at face-value; we cannot escape the process of interpretation. While Saussure still sees language as a closed system where every word has its place and consequently its meaning, Derrida wants to argue for language as an open system. In denying the metaphysics of presence the distances between inside and outside are also problematized. There is no place outside of language from where meaning can be generated.

Derrida next considers the theme of decentering with respect to French structuralist Levi Strauss's ethnology. Ethnology too demonstrates how although it sets out as a denouncement of Eurocentrism, its practices and methodologies get premised on ethnocentrism in its study and research of the 'Other' - "the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency". Derrida uses the classical debate on the opposition between nature and culture with respect to Levi Strauss's work. In his work, *Elementary Structures*, Strauss starts with the working definition of nature as the universal and spontaneous, not belonging to any other culture or any determinate norm. Culture, on the other hand, depends on a system of norms regulating society and is therefore capable of varying from one social structure to another. But Strauss encountered a 'scandal' challenging this binary opposition - incest prohibition. It is natural in the sense that is it almost universally present across most communities and hence is natural. However, it is also a prohibition, which makes it a part of the system of norms and customs and thereby cultural. Derrida argues that this disputation of Strauss's theory is not really a scandal, as it the pre-assumed binary opposition that makes it a scandal, the system which sanctions the difference between nature and culture. To quote him, "It could perhaps be said that the whole of philosophical conceptualization, systematically relating itself to the nature/culture opposition, is designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest."

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This leads Derrida to his theory of the bricoleur inspired from Levi Strauss. He argues that it is very difficult to arrive at a conceptual position "outside of philosophy", to not be absorbed to some extent into the very theory that one seeks to critique. He therefore insists on Strauss's idea of a bricolage, "the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur." It is thereby important to use these 'tools at hand' through intricate mechanisms and networks of subversion. For instance, although Strauss discovered the scandal, he continued to use sometimes the binary opposition of nature and culture as a methodological tool and to preserve as an instrument that those truth value he criticizes, "The opposition between nature and culture which I have previously insisted on seems today to offer a value which is above all methodological." Strauss discusses bricolage not only as an intellectual exercise, but also as "mythopoetical activity". He attempts to work out a structured study of myths, but realizes this is not a possibility, and instead creates what he calls his own myth of the mythologies, a 'third order code'. Derrida points out how his 'reference myth' of the Bororo myth, does not hold in terms of its functionality as a reference, as this choice becomes arbitrary and also instead of being dependent on typical character, it derives from irregularity and hence concludes, "that violence which consists in centering a language which is describing an acentric structure must be avoided".

Derrida still building on Strauss's work, introduces the concept of totalization - "Totalization is.... at one time as useless, at another time as impossible". In traditional conceptualization, totalization cannot happen as there is always too much one can say and even more that exists which needs to be talked/written about. However, Derrida argues that non-totalization needs to be conceptualized not the basis of finitude of discourse incapable of mastering an infinite richness, but along the concept of free-play - "If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field - that is, language and a finite language - excludes totalization." It is finite language which excludes totalization as language is made up of infinite signifier and signified functioning inter-changeably and arbitrarily, thereby opening up possibilities for infinite play and substitution. The field of language is limiting, however, there cannot be a finite discourse limiting that field.

Derrida explains the possibility of this free play through the concept of "supplementality" - "this movement of the free play, permitted by the lack, the absence of a center or origin, is the movement of supplementarity. One cannot determine the center, the sign which supplements it, which takes its place in its absence - because this sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a supplement". Supplementality is thus involves infinite substitutions of the centre which is an absence which leads to the movement of play. This becomes possible because of the lack in the signified. There is always an overabundance of the signifier to the signified. So a supplement would hence be an addition to what the signified means for already. Derrida also introduces the concept of how this meaning is always deferred (difference), how signifier and signified are inter-changeable in a complex network of free-play.

This concept of free-play Derrida believes also stands in tension with history. Although history was thought as a critique of the philosophy of presence, as a kind of shift; it has paradoxically become complicitous "with a teleological and scatological metaphysics." Free-play also stands in conflict with presence. Play is disruption of presence. Free play is always interplay of presence and absence. However, Derrida argues that a radical approach would not be the taking of presence or absence as ground for play. Instead the possibility of play should be the premise for presence or absence.

Derrida concludes this seminal work which is often regarded as the post-structuralist manifesto with the hope that we proceed towards an "interpretation of interpretation" where one "is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism". He says that we need to borrow Nietzsche's idea of affirmation to stop seeing play as limiting and negative. Nietzsche pronouncement "God is dead" need not be read as a destruction of a cohesive structure, but can be seen as a chance that opens up a possibility of diverse plurality and multiplicity.



**Self-Assessment**

Notes

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Derrida first read his paper 'Structure, Sign, and Plan in the Discourse of the Human Science in ..... .
  - (a) 1966
  - (b) 1970
  - (c) 1965
  - (d) 1980
- (ii) Derrida uses the classical debate on the opposition between ..... .
  - (a) Religion an culture
  - (b) Culture and society
  - (c) Nature and culture
  - (d) None of these
- (iii) Derrida concludes his seminal work regarded as the ..... .
  - (a) Post-structuralist manifesto
  - (b) Industrialist manifesto
  - (c) Both (a) and (b)
  - (d) None of these
- (iv) Derrida asserts that there are heterogeneous ways of erasing the difference between the signifies and the signified ..... .
  - (a) Three
  - (b) Two
  - (c) Four
  - (d) Five

**8.5 Summary**

- Derrida begins his essay by noting that structures have always informed Western thinking but have not been paid sufficient attention due to the very nature of the structure themselves: because they are essential to the very process of thought, they have been viewed as natural and inevitable and therefore more or less unquestionable. Derrida takes up as his subject matter the largely unexamined structurality of these structures, and he begins by noting that "By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form... Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which is opens up and makes possible. As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible".
- This notion of the center is essential for Derrida's analysis of the structure of language (which Derrida argues is the structure of all existence). However, because "the center, which is by definition unique, constituted the very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality," Derrida asserts that, within classical thought, "the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it... the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center". Derrida pushes this destabilized notion of the center to the point of a "rupture" in the history of thought on structurality where "it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play". This rupture, this deconstruction of the center thus created a world where "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely". In this move, Derrida has not just taken a new step in a known field but has invented a new way to walk on a piece of land that is both undiscovered and omnipresent.
- Therefore, even the most radical thinkers in the past - Derrida cites Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger - have offered only limited critiques of operations within the traditionally centered structure. Derrida asserts that "there are two heterogeneous ways of erasing the difference between the signifier and the signified: one, the classic way [of the aforementioned thinkers], consists in reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in submitting the sign to thought; the other, the one we are using here against the first one, consists in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned". This second way is ultimately characteristic of all of Derrida's work in this excerpt: without fail, he seeks to move to a new and entirely different mode of thinking instead of simply moving to new thoughts within the same old system.



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- Derrida goes on to consider a number of areas in which this destabilization, this internal decentering takes place. He first demonstrates how "the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them" as a general illustration of his principle that the application of his critique to the sciences "is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself". In short, he seeks "to preserve as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes", which is exactly what Derrida has done with language and discourse (and in so doing has done to every other field, scientific, linguistic, philosophical or otherwise, because, after all, everything is discourse). Or, rather, what Derrida has shown language and discourse to be doing to themselves: "No longer is any truth value attributed to [these old concepts of empirical discovery]; there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces. This is how the language of the social sciences criticizes itself".
- The remainder of the essay consists of Derrida explaining three key terms that flow from his deconstruction of the structure of discourse: bricolage, play, and supplementary.
- Bricolage is a technique that "uses 'the means at hand', that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which that are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appear necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous - and so forth". That is, because any sort of concrete link between signifier and signified has been shown to be impossible, one is therefore free to use whatever tools in whatever ways and in whatever combination one wishes to discuss the matter at hand.
- Bricolage is permitted by that which Derrida terms "play," and which he explains in the following quote: "If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field - that is, language and a finite language - excludes totalization. The field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite... instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions". Play is Derrida's way of simultaneously recognizing the infinite range of deconstruction is possible not because there is an infinite range of information but because the inherent quality of all information is to be lacking and for there to be no suitable material (information) with which to fill that lack. This leads to the notion of the supplementary: "The overabundance of the signifier, its supplementary character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be supplemented". Because positive, concrete definition is impossible for any term, every term necessarily requires a supplement or supplements, something or some things which help(s) it exist and be understood. Yet, at the same time, the object(s) which the supplement is (are) supplementing is (are) (a) supplement(s) itself. Extend this web in all directions and the relationship between bricolage, play, and the supplementary begins to make sense.
- And there you have it: discourse, destabilization, language critiquing itself, bricolage, play, the supplementary. Of course, the discussion here barely begins to scratch the surface of the implications made by Derrida, for within not even a full fourteen pages of text, has established the foundation of one of the most significant revolutions in the history of thought. Of course, saying that Derrida demonstrated how the history of thought contradicted itself and in so doing imploded the foundation of Western philosophy would certainly fit better with a deconstructionist view of the world. Yet, there is scant little chance of denying that Derrida himself holds some special place in this development: if not as its father then at least as its catalyst.

## 8.6 Key-Words

Notes

1. Ousia : Essence/being
2. Aletheia : Truth
3. Transcendentality : The realm of (for Kant) the conditions of possible experience and knowing.
4. Physis : Nature
5. Nomos : Law [culture]

## 8.7 Review Questions

1. Discuss Jacques Derrida's Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences.
2. What are the key concepts of treated in Derrida's essays?
3. What is bricolage? What is its Mythopoetical Virtue?
4. What has led to the rupture of the type of discourse? What replaces it?

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a) (ii) (c) (iii) (a) (iv) (b)

## 8.8 Further Readings



Books

1. Acts of Literature, ed. Attridge, New York: Routledge, 1992 (AL).
2. Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas, trans. Brault & Naas, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999 (AEL).
3. Circumfessions: Fifty Nine Periphrases, in Bennington, G., Jacques Derrida, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 (Circ).
4. On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, London: Routledge, 2001 (OCF).
5. Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice, (inc. "Force of the Law"), eds. Cornell, Carlson, & Benjamin, New York: Routledge, 1992 (DPJ).
6. Dissemination, trans. Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 (D).
7. "Eating Well' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in Who Comes After the Subject? eds. Cadava, Connor, & Nancy, New York: Routledge, 1991, p 96-119.
8. The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation, trans. Kamuf, ed. McDonald, New York: Schocken Books, 1985 (EO).

## **Unit 9: Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' – Jacques Derrida: Critical Appreciation**

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### **Objectives**

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.
- Examine Derrida's essays critically.

### **Introduction**

In his famous essay, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' which was read at the John Hopkins International Colloquium on "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" in October 1966, Derrida demonstrates how structuralism as represented by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss which sets out as a criticism or rejection of science and metaphysics can be read as embodying precisely those aspects of science and metaphysics which it seeks to challenge. The essay concludes by saying, "There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of free play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from free play and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms free play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism." Thus, we have two diametrically opposite interpretations of structuralism, and we are unable to decide which the 'right' one is. This 'aporia' between two interpretations is due to the force of 'difference' intrinsic to the structure of language. The force of 'difference' makes language characteristically 'centrifugal', that is moving away from the center by 'scattering' of the philosophical system or by its 'dissemination' into multiple and conflicting interpretations. Characteristically, Derrida in this essay notes that 'language bears within itself, the necessity of its own critique'. The essay is considered as inauguration of 'poststructuralism' (going beyond structuralism) as a theoretical movement.

### **9.1 Text – Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences**

Derrida's "Structure", originally published in 1970, is justly labelled one of the more easily comprehensible texts in his large body of work. In it, he discusses some of his basic notions of post-structuralism and deconstruction, roughly explains the origin of the school of thought revolving around these practices, and gives several concrete examples in support of his arguments. Compared with other introductory essays by post-structuralist theorists, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" remains one of the key texts of basic post-structuralist thought, and appears to be a good introduction to Derrida's work.

Rather than arguing a specific point based on the evidence he gives, Derrida writes what at certain points almost resembles an ultra-brief history of structural and post-structural thought. It is in this essay, too, where he introduces a number of terms that are essential for an understanding of his own theories (such as his concept of "play"). Most of Derrida's theoretical constructs, however, although obviously alluded to, are not mentioned explicitly. While spending a good amount of time describing what he elsewhere called "logocentrism", for example, Derrida never explicitly formulates these thoughts in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences".

As in most of his writing, here, too, Derrida applies much of what he writes about to the way he writes (It is no secret that it is exactly this practice of writing that makes it so difficult to read Derrida.). As usual, he "means" much more than merely what is perceivable on the surface of his text. Accordingly, this essay simultaneously deals with several topics that are never actually named. The basic deconstructive procedure of detecting, questioning and upsetting dichotomies, for example, is performed on the traditional metaphysical concept of "structure", but not put in the foreground. In reading this one -- much as any other -- of Derrida's texts, we thus have to act exactly as he advises us to in his own readings of other texts: Look for meaning not only in declarative and prescriptive passages of texts, but in the margins, the gaps, "between the lines".

In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida starts off hinting at an "event", a "rupture", that brought about a revolutionary change in the history of the concept of structure. (He later goes on to state that this rupture marks the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism, along with all the ideas and theories that led to it.) Derrida then goes on to recapitulate what, up to that point, the general ideas of structure were. He shows that the whole history of the concept of structure itself can be seen as functioning within one system, one structure, namely that of metaphysics (part of which is logocentrism). What all those concepts have in common is that they imagine structures as organized around a center. But since this center -- be it God, freedom, man, happiness, consciousness, etc. -- can not be affected by the structure surrounding it, it has to be seen as residing outside of the system, as not actually being in the center. Although constituting the axis around which everything revolves, the center - i.e. the source, goal, and explanation of All - is not part of the system it defines, it is not located in its center.

At the time "when language invaded the universal problematic" (a recurring hint in Derrida's writing at Saussure's theories), it was necessary to begin to think that none of the structures discussed have centers, and it is this moment when, according to Derrida, the "rupture" referred to in the opening paragraph occurred. The simple fact that signs define themselves by their relationship to other signs implies that there can not be "a center" - neither within nor without the system (or 'structure'), since this ultimate sign (the 'transcendental signifier') could not be defined without reference to yet another sign.

Derrida goes on to list a number of influential thinkers who were important in propagating this shift from structuralist to post-structuralist thought (among them Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger). What all the new theories and concepts had in common is that -- even though they claimed to be aware of the predicaments -- they still operated from within a metaphysical system. The new generation of philosophers articulating them were for the most part quite ignorant of the fact that it is impossible to escape the metaphysical system, as long as one does not want to abandon the concept of the sign altogether.

This general transition from a belief in structures with centers to a belief in decentered structures has, according to Derrida, relevance in connection with what is generally called "human sciences". Ethnology, he argues, is an academic discipline that could only be born within a metaphysical system (that of ethnocentrism) that had a center (Europe). After "the rupture", of course, these perspectives had to be revised. In giving a more detailed example, Derrida discusses the theoretical work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who -- surprisingly early -- thought and argued in accordance with much of what Derrida formulated much later, but was clearly positioned within a metaphysical system. Derrida analyzes Lévi-Strauss' treatment of the nature/culture dichotomy, as well as his studies of mythology. At the same time - in good Derridaen fashion - he takes the opportunity to examine Lévi-Strauss' methods and modes of arguing. This instance is a good example of how Derrida usually treats texts he works with on multiple layers, and how he works his theories into

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his own text-about-another-text. He writes about Lévi-Strauss that "his discourse [...] reflects on itself and criticizes itself" -- which is exactly what Derrida himself does with both the text he uses to support his argument (Lévi-Strauss'), and with his own writing. Other deconstructive features of Lévi-Strauss' text that Derrida mentions include the setting up and questioning of dichotomies, the exposure of the fragmentedness and decenteredness of texts (here myths, and -- following Lévi-Strauss' argument -- ultimately language itself), the impossibility of totalization when it comes to the concept of language, and, finally, the concept of "play". (None of these issues are addressed in this article, as they are all explained in a very comprehensible way in Derrida's essay.)

Some of these arguments (in the fashion of "always already there") are developed by Derrida himself, and -- since they are not explicitly mentioned in the texts he analyzes --read into Lévi-Strauss' work. This is yet another instance where Derrida performs in praxis what he simultaneously discusses in theory: The concept of play; The open-endedness of interpretation; The making-use of the surplus of meaning and the lack of a center in order to validate new/further meanings, meanings that the text itself might not have been aware of.

## 9.2 Critical Appreciation

As the title indicates, this essay is about the social sciences-about "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."To understand the essay, it is helpful to know where Derrida is going, what he's up to.Grossly speaking, I would say the essay is about the fall of metaphysics-about the disbelief in all secure intellectual and moral foundations. In any system of thought, play (or contingency) replaces certainty and coherence. All meaning gets transformed into discourse, the continual play of signification in which signs only point to more signs, never to things, beings, presences, or other landmarks of security. As Derrida will say at the end of the essay, living with the desire for metaphysics AND at the same time sensing the impossibility of metaphysics defines the paradoxical situation and field of the social sciences.

That's what I think this essay is up to:

1. It charts the rise of the "incredulity toward all metanarratives," as Lyotard says, showing in what way cherished values of the West have been irrevocably altered; and
2. it points, via Levi-Strauss, to the possibility of a new discourse and a new capacity for dealing with the demise of metaphysics.

The social sciences reflect the Western situation; stuck between a desire for foundations and the realization of the necessity of anti-foundationalism but the social sciences also offer at least the suggestion of a new discourse for modernity. The essay charts both cases: the demise and the future possibility.

Fleshing out some key terms may aid in understanding the essay.

By "structure" I take it Derrida means an intellectual edifice or philosophical system of ideas, a kind of discourse in which all elements are defined by their relation to one another and given meaning by the position they occupy in the system's total arrangement.

For Example, The constitution of the United States, Husserlian phenomenology, or Christian cosmology. Each lends meaning and support to experiences within the system by defining experience in relation to a definite, structured pattern.

A center is that part of a structure which focuses and organizes the entire system.

One good example is Aristotle's Unmoved Mover: the UM does not itself move but it nonetheless guides and maintains the motion or animation of the entire ordered cosmos. Whatever accidents or mutations may occur, the unmoved mover provides unshakable stability to the Aristotelian cosmology.

Derrida's claim is that the West has been-and in part still is-obsessed with the search for a center. And, again, the center's function is to supply a foundation which coheres the system and limits the amount and degree of arbitrariness or play in "the total form." The center designates an invariable presence.



Play is simply any shift in the structure, any unplanned, unordered event. Deviance, alteration, contingency, arbitrariness, perversion, spontaneity, mutation—all these are synonyms for play.

If the center mitigates and moderates play within the structure, it thereby provides the requisite coherence, organization, and stability for making the world appear to be ordered and intelligible.

"The center is not the center."

This phrase defines "the event" of the rupture which Derrida talks about in the first paragraph.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, the center (so Derrida asserts) was conceived as that safe, untouchable region which was immune to play. It was immune to play but it also "permitted the play of its elements inside the total form" of a structure. The center was seen to regulate play but also to avoid its effects.

But to avoid its effects the center could not be conceived of as within the structure, for the structure is the scene of play, play that is allowed for and contained. To not be influenced by the play which pervades a structure, the center had to be conceived of as "beyond" the structure, as "transcending" it. But to regulate and guide the system, the center had also to be conceived of as within the system, as implicated within it, as a part of what the system is. How else could it effect the system?

This paradox gave rise to "the rupture" of the notion of the structure: it decentered the structure. "The center is not the center," as Derrida says. This means that "the concept of centered structure . . . is contradictorily coherent". That which had given security and certitude to Western thought, had provided the basis for the Western world, rests upon a contradiction and, more, cannot thereby attain the coherence it had striven for. By its own standards, the concept of centered structurality critiques itself and falls prey to-play. A center that is contradictory is no center.

The center itself results from play, and this realization defines the event of the internal disintegration of the concept of structure. Play has become fundamental.

### **Precursors to and Exponents of Rupture**

Derrida mentions that Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger all contributed to "The event" of the rupture.

Nietzsche critiqued metaphysics, finding it everywhere; he "substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign" for the concepts of truth and Being.

Freud critiqued consciousness, showing how the subject cannot amount to a secure center; it is not even known to itself.

And Heidegger called for the destruction of all metaphysics and the destruction of the "determination of Being as presence."

One interesting point here is that in each of their critiques of metaphysics and centered structures, these thinkers are bound to the very language of metaphysics. This is because there is no language available to the West beside this kind of language. This fact, that critics of metaphysics are caught in a circle, also defines the situation for the human sciences. But as we shall see with this discourse of Levi-Strauss, the human sciences also hint at a way somewhat to accept Nietzschean affirmation.

### **Difference**

To say that play has become fundamental is to say that all meaning has become discourse. The center, which was supposed to be fixed, turned out to vary with different philosophical systems. It could not be repeated in just the same way or as just the same thing.

Formerly signs pointed to the center and received their justification and stability therefrom. But now that the center is seen as a kind of play, signs only point to more signs, "an indefinite chain of representations." A sign does not achieve anything but more signs. One sign endlessly substitutes another sign and meaning is a kind of vertigo. In terms of our course, the transcendental ego, say, provides no secure foundation, grants access to no apodictic certainty. Rather it is a sign that points to other signs continuously.

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Difference, then, is this disparity between signs; it is the play of sign substitution in which one sign in any discourse always remains other than itself and points to another which is other than itself. Meaning always gets passed along and never attained. More importantly, Difference is the condition of play which precedes and makes possible all sign production or use. Difference means that no sign achieves what it signifies; it is the disruption of presence; nothing is ever made present; all signs declare an absence.

### **The Role of Levi-Strauss**

The role of Levi-Strauss in this essay is, I think, to epitomize the situation. Levi-Strauss uses the language of metaphysics to criticize metaphysics.

"The language of metaphysics" is a language of oppositions, opposition between being and non-being, truth and error, God and man, form and matter, subject and object, nature and culture.

Levi-Strauss focuses in particular on the nature-culture distinction. In a system of thought which maintains this distinction, the distinction should hold for all cases, at least insofar as the system itself is consistent and fixed; the center should designate the same invariable presence.

However, the opposition breaks down with the case of the prohibition of incest. The prohibition of incest, which Levi-Strauss made an object of study, is both cultural (in the sense that it is subject to a norm of culture and is relative and particular) and natural (in the sense of being universal and spontaneous).

The incest prohibition thus disrupts or thwarts the dichotomy so crucial to a certain cosmology. The very center swallows itself up, at least for this system.

The important point to note here is that the concept of centered structure does not meet its own requirements for being a centered structure. Derrida states that this means "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique."

There are two ways to deal with this situation: (1) to step outside of philosophy, no longer to employ its discourse; and (2) "conserving all these old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits". That is to say, the second choice is to "preserve as an instrument something whose value" is criticized.

Levi-Strauss takes the second way. The bricoleur is a person who employs the concept of metaphysics to get something done while yet critiquing the limits and adequacy of those concepts. He "uses the means at hand."

Levi-Strauss thus studies other cultures, their myths, but realizes full well that his own discourse about myths is a kind of mythology. For it presupposes and requires concepts which break down, i.e., which are the result of a play as unavoidable as the play in the cultures whose myths he studies.

The main point here is that Levi-Strauss offers a way to confront what is our situation anyway. That is, since we are stuck using the concepts of metaphysics while being also incapable of accepting them, we need a way to confront the situation. Levi-Strauss suggests bricolage, not passing beyond philosophy but using philosophy to critique itself.

### **Two Interpretations of Interpretation**

This position that Levi-Strauss offers is middle-ground. It rests between two interpretations of interpretation, just as, for Derrida, the entire West does. Taking a little from both interpretations, the West is not more of one than the other.

Two interpretations of interpretation means two differing ways of confronting "the situation," where "the situation" is also an interpretation, a play, a playful discourse-not a centered structure which true interpretation is necessary, not "true."

One way of confronting the situation of the rupture of the concept of centered structure is to regret the rupture, to be sad and nostalgic and "live" the necessity of interpretation as an exile." Derrida equates this position or interpretation with Rousseau. Its principal feature is that it considers the noncenter as a loss of center. It would rather have the security and certainty of a fixed presence,

a firm principle which accounts for all things and all variance, than accept the necessity of interpretation. The second interpretation of interpretation is what Derrida calls Nietzschean affirmation. Briefly put, Nietzsche said that truth was error—that all our cherished concepts of truth and certainty are merely lies the truth of which we are incapable of doubting because we desire that they be true. Nietzschean affirmation, a kind of impossible request, would be the acceptance of this case. It would embrace the necessity of interpretation and not miss truth. Its life would be fulfilled by play alone, by "the security of play." It would no longer need the security of a fixed purpose or all-embracing concept.

We cannot choose between the two. We are the two, half-bricolage and half-engineer. We are nostalgic for an abiding, all-embracing center as presence and as bricolage, we are capable of reveling in play. Presently we cannot choose (choice would presuppose some common fixed ground from which to choose, but this is impossible given the interminable play and differences which separates any two positions or signs.

"Here there is a kind of question." We cannot choose and yet half of us, the bricoleur, criticizes the other half with its own language. Something new is in the making. We still look away from what is being born. Derrida's suggestion is that we be aware of the condition and confront its monstrosity face to face. And prepare for it.



Notes

1. An event—a rupture and a redoubling—has occurred in the concept of structure.
2. Traditionally, structure has had a neutralizing or limiting point of presence, a fixed origin, a center whose function—to orient, balance, and organize—limited the play of the structure.
3. The center—which contradictorily (expressing Desire) escapes the structure as the point where change is interdicted—masters anxiety (in play oneself is at stake) on behalf of an source or destiny, a full presence beyond play.
4. This history of the concept of structure is . . . the history of the substitution of metaphors and metonymies expressing Being as presence: essence, existence, substance, subject, truth, transcendental, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.

Once it was realized that the center has never been originally present, it became necessary to think it as linguistic function: an infinite play of signifiers

This re-[visioning] of structure may be seen in Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, each of whom still retained, necessarily, the language of metaphysics; therefore there have been ongoing, mutually destructive commentaries.

There are two ways to erase the difference between signifier and signified:

1. the classic way, to reduce or derive the signifier, to submit the sign to thought [e.g., for Husserl, the word expresses the thought];
2. JD way, by contrast, "putting into question the system in which the previous reduction functioned; first and foremost, the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible."

Ethnology perhaps occupies a privileged place among the human sciences. It arose as European dominance waned, and alongside the destruction of the history of metaphysics, but qua scientific discourse, it necessarily retains the presuppositions of the ethnocentrism it seeks to deconstruct . . . and can sustain vigilance regarding those historic metaphysical concepts.

Levi-Strauss is here chosen, mostly for his criticism of the language used in the social sciences.

From his first book, L-S uses and rejects the nature-culture opposition: after defining the first as what is "universal and spontaneous" and the latter in terms of socially inculcated norms and laws,

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he points out that the incest prohibition is both. As what can't be thought within the opposition of these concepts, the prohibition "precedes them, probably as the condition of their possibility." Such study deconstituting the founding concepts of the history of philosophy exceeds facile attempts to go beyond philosophy.

L-S uses as methodological tools concepts whose truth can no longer be affirmed . . . and persists in this double intention:

on the one hand, he envisions an integration of sciences to be carried out by the exact natural sciences, "the reintegration of culture in nature and finally of life within the whole of its physico-chemical conditions"; on the other hand, he set forth methodological "bricolage"--to use whatever is at hand, eclectically, adapting, pluralistically. Actually, every discourse is bricolage: the bricoleur constructs the myth of the engineer (who allegedly sets up a self-constituting language); and thus the bricoleur is not radically different from the "engineer."

Transition to a second thread.

L-S describes bricolage as mythopoetical.

L-S's work reflects on its own language as abandoning "all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia. Thus, from *The Raw and the Cooked*: The "key" myth is irregularly placed among neighboring ones (i.e., does not function in any central way).

Myth is not centered/sourced, so mythology must not betray it by a centered discourse. Mythology "intended to ensure the reciprocal translatability of several myths." The science here has no center, subject, author. Myths are anonymous; the audience become silent performers.

Thus ethnographic bricolage as explicitly mythopoetic makes the need for a center appear mythological, makes the need appear as an historical illusion.

There are risks. What will distinguish a higher quality of mythopoesis? This is an inevitable question which requires thematizing the relation of philosophy and myth, without which attempts to go beyond philosophy end up being merely bad philosophy--empiricism--and note L-S's consistent claim to be presenting empirical science, as proposals that can be revised by a more complete sampling of a totality of data which it is useless or impossible to require as prelude.

But non-totalization can be determined from the standpoint of the concept of play--which field excludes totalization, since there is no center which arrests and grounds the variability of the structure. This is the movement of supplementarity--the sign that replaces the center is added as a surplus. L-S: to sustain the required complementarity of signifier and signified you need a supplementary ration of signification. Mana, for example, is "force and action, quality and state, noun and verb; abstract and concrete, omnipresent and localized." Its function is to endow a signified with added content.

Such a term as mana opposes "the absence of signification without entailing by itself any particular signification." The overabundance of the signifier is the result of the necessary supplement to what is finite [and lacks a center]. Therefore play is important in L-S. Play is always also caught up in tension. Play is in tension [first,] with history, which has always been conceived as "a detour between two presences." There is a risk of historicism (a moment in the history of metaphysics): with new structures arising on account of change and in radical discontinuity, e.g., L-S on the origin of language--"born in one fell swoop." There is also a tension between play and presence. It is necessary to think the play of presence and absence radically--on the basis of play, not on the basis of presence (in spite of L-S's nostalgia for exemplary societies).

There is an alternative: Nietzschean, affirmative, joyous, uncertain, play, surrendering to generic indetermination and the seminal adventure of the trace.

There are two interpretations of interpretation:

1. deciphering a truth;
2. affirming play beyond man and humanism.

These two finally irreconcilable interpretations of interpretation share the field of the social sciences. It seems trivial to talk of choosing between them, since their common field is not yet conceived. We are just in the beginning of the conception, formation, gestation, and labor to bring forth a monstrosity, as any new birth is, formless, mute, infant.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Derrida demonstrates how structuralism as represented by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in .....
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1965 | (b) 1966 |
| (c) 1950 | (d) 1985 |
- (ii) Derrida's structure published in .....
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1970 | (b) 1975 |
| (c) 1966 | (d) 1985 |
- (iii) In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida starts off hinting at an event, a .....
- |            |               |
|------------|---------------|
| (a) change | (b) rupture   |
| (c) ideas  | (d) structure |
- (iv) By structure, Derrida means .....
- |                             |                                   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (a) an intellectual edifice | (b) philosophical system of ideas |
| (c) a kind of diseases      | (d) all of these                  |
| (e) none of these           |                                   |

### 9.3 Summary

- Although an analysis of structure cannot provide a complete analysis of a literary work, it can be used as a method of approach in interpretation. Robert Detweiler, in his book *Story, Sign, and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary-Critical Methods*, describes how structuralism attempts to analyze literature: "In every instance it is the structure, the relationship among phonemes, sentences, and other elements of discourse, and not the individual elements by themselves that produces meaning". In other words, studying the structure of language and the work as a whole does not explain the meaning, but it can provide an understanding of how a piece of literature takes on meaning. *Miramar*, by Naguib Mahfouz, provides an example of the uses of structural analysis. *Miramar* consists of the same basic story, told from the point of view of four different characters. On the language level, the diction each narrator uses to tell their story sets them apart from the others, while highlighting the division of culture that each comes to represent. On the plot level, the repetition of the same basic events works to further develop the story each time it is told, while the unique point of view of each telling provides a well-rounded view through pluralistic storytelling. These central ideas come together to form the whole: a slice out of life in Egypt, the Pension *Miramar*, and the lives of its residents.
- In his essay "Structuralism, Semiotics, and Deconstruction," David Richter discusses Saussure's concept of parataxis. In order to illustrate the concept, Richter compares words of a certain type (e.g. nouns or verbs) to the items listed on a restaurant's menu under the soup category: "The items are similar enough to belong to one category (soups) yet different (in their ingredients)". In other words (no pun intended), words can exist in the same category yet have very different shades of meaning or levels of uses. In *Miramar*, Mahfouz plays with the language in order to indicate different personalities and class backgrounds in his narrators. For example, Amer Wagdi, an elderly man who was once a well-known journalist, uses eloquent speech and high diction in his narration. He starts off the novel with a poetic air: "Alexandria. At last. Alexandria, Lady of the Dew. Bloom of white nimbus. Bosom of radiance, wet with sky-water. Core of nostalgia steeped in honey and tears". The words he chooses to



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describe Alexandria are both cultured and romantic, emphasizing his education. He also tends to reminisce frequently, emphasizing his age and the many memories he has to reflect on. Sarhan El-Beheiry is a country boy from a good family; he is also educated and tends to reminisce, but his reflections are generally of a more innocent and rustic nature: "The whole world delighted me - the excitement of my own desires, the softness of the sunlight, with the multitude of faces I saw waiting around me. And I remembered again the cotton-picking season at home". In contrast, Hosni Allam, an uneducated landowner (and therefore upper class despite his lack of education), frequently uses colloquial expressions, such as his oft-repeated "Ferekeeko, don't blame me". The repetition of slang throughout Hosni Allam's narration establishes his lack of education. Through such an analysis of the language used in the different characters' storytelling, the reader understands the characterization of each speaker.

- Besides establishing the character of the narrator, the language each storyteller uses also establishes what Seymour Chatman calls the "presence" of the narrator: "The narrator comes into existence when the story itself is made to seem a demonstrable act of communication". Chatman goes on to illustrate the difference between a narrator who tells his story and one who shows it. "If an audience feels that it is in some sense spoken to (regardless of the medium), then the existence of a teller must be presumed". The narrator who tells his story does so in a voice that is clearly directed to the reader. The narrator who shows his story, however, has the difficulty of convincing the reader that they have emerged into the midst of the story: "The author must make special efforts to preserve the illusion that the events are literally happening before the reader's eyes". The narrators in *Miramar* clearly show the differences in their styles of narration. From the beginning, Amer Wagdi's story is clearly told to us: he soliloquizes about the beauty of Alexandria, about the changes in his old friend Mariana, in a way that he never would if not preening before an audience. At times he speaks his thoughts directly to the city and to other characters, but he is still speaking to his readers, as his sentence, "Beware of idleness," with its unspoken "you," shows. Hosni Allam's account also takes on "teller" qualities through his constant plea of, "Ferekeeko, don't blame me". Just like the two before him, Mansour Bahy assumes the voice of one speaking to the audience. He makes statements such as, "I liked the weather in Alexandria. It suited me,". His habit of telling the audience what he thinks or feels, instead of allowing the reader to perceive descriptive passages from his point of view, establishes his role as a narrator who tells rather than shows. However, by the time the book comes to Sarhan El-Beheiry's account, the reader already knows - having been told it three times already - that this narration will end with the narrator's death. Since dead men cannot tell someone their story, it is assumed from the beginning that Sarhan is showing the reader. This assumption is supported by the way Sarhan El-Beheiry uses the language to narrate. Rather than speaking his thoughts directly to the audience, they are presented as personal. "He can't be completely broke, I thought," Sarhan muses. The use of the words, "I thought," makes it clear that we are simply inside Sarhan's head, sharing his thoughts, instead of being talked to. The differences in narration style helps to establish character, as well as supporting the inevitable conclusion of all four narratives: the death of Sarhan El-Beheiry.
- As characterization is established, the unique cultural background of each narrator becomes clear. Jacques Derrida proclaims that "ethnology - like any science - comes about within the element of discourse". True to form, as each character tells his version of the story, a sense of ethnicity is established. Amer Wagdi, speaking of his youth, says, "Those were the days - the glory of working for the Cause, independence, the Nation! Amer Wagdi was someone indeed - full of favours for friends, but a man to be feared and avoided by enemies". Amer's experience with culture was mainly through being part of the revolution, although as an intellectual he is also the most open-minded of the narrators, earning him the right to both open and close the novel. Mansour Bahy comes from a similar background: "I work at the Alexandria Broadcasting Service," he tells Mariana, the landlady at the *Miramar*. He idolizes Amer

Wagdi and seems to wish himself on the same level, but he is merely a hazy modern imitation of what Amer once represented. Hosni Allam's frequent use of colloquial speech and the attitude with which he looks down upon all the others stems from the lordliness of the landowning class. In his opening paragraph he speaks with disdain of being rejected because of his lack of education and surplus of attitude: "No education," she said, and a hazardous hundred feddans.' That's what Miss Blue-Eyes said, as she slammed the door in my face and sat down behind to wait for the next prospective stud-bull to come along". Hosni's account of this exchange reveals not only his own attitude, but also that of the blue-eyed upper class girl who rejected him. In the same manner, Sarhan El-Beheiry reveals his country roots through his frequent references to nature and that culture's dependence on it. When he first meets Zohra, the servant at the Miramar who has run away from an arranged marriage in her native village, he says, "I remembered the cotton-picking season at home". His constant references to the rustic ways of life delineate his background as agrarian, albeit with the education that comes with a middle class family. In this manner, each character reveals their individual cultural background through their different uses of language. Despite its usefulness in analyzing character and content by the language used, the study of linguistic structure has its limits. As Culler points out, linguistics "may provide a general focus, either suggesting to the critic that he look for differences and oppositions which can be correlated with one another and organized as a system which generates the episodes or forms of the text, or offering a set of concepts in which interpretations may be stated". However, Culler describes a "second approach" to structural analysis, which involves the structure of the work as a whole. This approach to structural analysis is completely different than the linguistic approach; as Culler says, "A study of plot cannot be a study of the ways in which sentences are combined, for two versions of the same plot need have no sentences in common, nor need they, perhaps, have any linguistic deep-structures in common". In *Miramar*, the structure of the language used contributes a great deal to the development of character and culture, but an analysis of the structure of the novel itself shows the development of the story, as it is told and retold from new points of view. Each narrator uses a different linguistic style, yet still manages to tell the same basic story; although a purely linguistic analysis of structure would balk at this, an analysis that focuses on plot structure allows for these inconsistencies between narrators. Culler observes, "It seems an elementary and intuitively given fact that a story can be told in different ways and remain, in an important sense, the same story". In using different voices to tell and retell the events leading up to Sarhan El-Beheiry's death, *Miramar* uses this innate ability of readers to recognize different versions of the same story, at the same expecting that they will also be able to interpret the development of the story with each unique telling of it.

#### 9.4 Key-Words

1. Metonymy : Substitution
2. Eidos : Plato's term: "form," essence
3. Energia : "Energy"/activation
4. Techne : Technique, skill, art, craft
5. Factum : Fact
6. Bricolage : Using whatever means are linguistically at hand, regardless of their truth
7. Bricoleur : One who engages in bricolage

#### 9.5 Review Questions

1. Who is Claude Levi-Strauss and why is his work so important for Derrida?
2. What are the two possible reactions to or interpretations of this new understanding of 'Structure', Sign, and Play? When does Derrida cite as example?

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3. Define the following:

- (i) presence            (ii) absence            (iii) trace            (iv) difference  
(v) freely            (vi) freeplay            (vii) signification.

4. What has been central to the development of Western Metaphysics? What has been the foundation of his structuration of structure?

**Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (b)            (ii) (a)            (iii) (b)            (iv) (d)

**9.6 Further Readings**



Books

1. Acts of Literature, ed. Attridge, New York: Routledge, 1992 (AL).
2. Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas, trans. Brault & Naas, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999 (AEL).
3. Circumfessions: Fifty Nine Periphrases, in Bennington, G., Jacques Derrida, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 (Circ).
4. On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, London: Routledge, 2001 (OCF).
5. Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice, (inc. "Force of the Law"), eds. Cornell, Carlson, & Benjamin, New York: Routledge, 1992 (DPJ).
6. Dissemination, trans. Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 (D).
7. "'Eating Well' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in Who Comes After the Subject? eds. Cadava, Connor, & Nancy, New York: Routledge, 1991, p 96-119.
8. The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation, trans. Kamuf, ed. McDonald, New York: Schocken Books, 1985 (EO).

## Unit 10: Freud and Literature – Lionel Trilling: An Introduction

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the Academic Life of Lionel Trilling.
- Discuss Critical and Literary Works.

### Introduction

Lionel Mordecai Trilling (4 July 1905 - 5 November 1975) was an American literary critic, author, and teacher. With wife Diana Trilling, he was a member of the New York Intellectuals and contributor to the *Partisan Review*. Although he did not establish a school of literary criticism, he is one of the leading U.S. critics of the twentieth century who traced the contemporary cultural, social, and political implications of literature. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he has been a subject of continued interest.

Trilling discusses the relationships that exist between Freud and literature. Beginning with the statement that psychoanalysis may be viewed as a culmination of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement in literature, Trilling develops a striking thesis that revolves around the delineation of three Romantic hallmarks: devotion to research into the self, recognition of the hidden element in human behavior, and the concept of the mind as a divisible entity. While all these items are undoubtedly part of the Freudian base, Trilling suggests that Freud added a rationalistic anti-Romantic construct to the system, viewing the final aim of psychoanalysis as control of the impulses - "where id was, there shall ego be." In critical, but not unsympathetic fashion, Trilling regards Freud's views on the artist as somewhat narrow and undertakes at some length to reconcile certain contradictions. A picture of the difference between the creative artist and the neurotic ultimately emerges; the former in command of his fantasies, the latter possessed by them. Trilling feels that Freud's conception of the mind as imagistic "naturalizes" poetry. The entire Freudian depiction of the unconscious both opens and complicates the world for the artist, and Freudian man is seen as a "creature of far more dignity and far more interest than the man which any other modern system has been able to conceive--an inextricable tangle of culture and biology."

### 10.1 Academic Life

Lionel Trilling was born in Queens, New York City, the son of Fannie (née Cohen), who was from London, and David Trilling, a tailor from Bialystok in Poland. His family was Jewish. In 1921, he graduated from DeWitt Clinton High School, and, at age sixteen, entered Columbia University,

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thus beginning a perpetual association with the university. In 1925, he graduated from Columbia, and, in 1926, earned a Master of Arts degree. He taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and at Hunter College. In 1932, he taught literature at Columbia University. In 1938, he earned his doctorate with a dissertation about Matthew Arnold, that he later published. In 1939, he was promoted to assistant professor - the first tenured Jewish professor in the English department; in 1948, he was promoted to full professor. In 1965, he became the George Edward Woodberry Professor of Literature and Criticism. Trilling was a popular instructor, and for 30 years taught, with Jacques Barzun, Columbia's Colloquium on Important Books, a course about the relationship between literature and cultural history. His students included Lucien Carr, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Hollander, Cynthia Ozick, Carolyn Gold Heilbrun, Louis Menand, and Norman Podhoretz. From 1969 to 1970 he was the Norton professor at Harvard University. In 1972 he was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities to deliver the first Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, described as "the highest honor the federal government confers for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities." Trilling served as a Senior Fellow of the Kenyon School of English and subsequently as a Senior Fellow of the Indiana School of Letters.

In 1937, he joined the recently revived magazine *Partisan Review*, a Marxist, but anti-Stalinist, journal founded by William Phillips and Philip Rahv in 1934.

The *Partisan Review* was associated with the New York Intellectuals - Trilling, his wife Diana Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Delmore Schwartz, William Phillips, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, F. W. Dupee, Paul Goodman, Lionel Abel, Irving Howe, Saul Bellow, Leslie Fiedler, Elizabeth Hardwick, Richard Chase, William Barrett, Daniel Bell, Hannah Arendt, Isaac Rosenfeld, Susan Sontag, Steven Marcus, Norman Podhoretz, and Hilton Kramer - who emphasised the influence of history and culture upon authors and literature. As such, the New York Intellectuals distanced themselves from the New Critics, by concentrating upon the socio-political ramifications of the discussed literature. In the preface to the essays collection *Beyond Culture* (1965), he defends the New York Intellectuals: As a group, it is busy and vivacious about ideas, and, even more, about attitudes. Its assiduity constitutes an authority. The structure of our society is such that a class of this kind is bound by organic filaments to groups less culturally fluent, which are susceptible to its influence.

Trilling, who became an associate professor at Columbia in 1945, was made a full professor in 1948, and thereafter achieved the University's highest honor, becoming a University Professor in 1970. He was awarded a number of honorary degrees by American institutions including Harvard, Northwestern, Case Western Reserve, Brandeis and Yale; he also received Honorary Litt. D. degrees from the universities of Durham and Leicester in England. He held the Eastman Professorship at Oxford (1965) and was later appointed a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford (1972-73). In 1951, Trilling became a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and a Fellow of the Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1972 he received the first Thomas Jefferson Award in the Humanities. His lecture on that occasion was entitled "Mind in the Modern World."

## 10.2 Critical and Literary Works

Trilling wrote one novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), about an affluent Communist couple's encounter with a Communist defector. (Trilling later acknowledged that the character was inspired by his Columbia College compatriot and contemporary Whittaker Chambers). His short stories include "The Other Margaret." Otherwise, he wrote essays and reviews, in which he reflected on literature's ability to challenge the morality and conventions of the culture. Critic David Daiches said of Trilling, "Mr. Trilling likes to move out and consider the implications, the relevance for culture, for civilization, for the thinking man today, of each particular literary phenomenon which he contemplates, and this expansion of the context gives him both his moments of his greatest perceptions, and his moments of disconcerting generalization."

Trilling published two complex studies of authors Matthew Arnold (1939) and E. M. Forster (1943), both written in response to a concern with "the tradition of humanistic thought and the intellectual middle class which believes it continues this tradition." His first collection of essays,

The *Liberal Imagination*, was published in 1950, followed by the collections *The Opposing Self* (1955), focusing on the conflict between self-definition and the influence of culture, *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (1955), *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956), and *Beyond Culture* (1965), a collection of essays concerning modern literary and cultural attitudes toward selfhood. In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), he explores the ideas of the moral self in post-Enlightenment Western civilization. He wrote the introduction to *The Selected Letters of John Keats* (1951), in which he defended Keats's notion of Negative Capability, as well as the introduction, "George Orwell and the Politics of Truth", to the 1952 reissue of George Orwell's book, *Homage to Catalonia*.

In 2008, Columbia University Press published an unfinished novel that Trilling abandoned in the late 1940s. Scholar Geraldine Murphy discovered the half-finished novel among Trilling's papers archived at Columbia University. Trilling's novel, titled *The Journey Abandoned: The Unfinished Novel*, is set in the 1930s and involves a young protagonist, Vincent Hammell, who seeks to write a biography of an elder, towering figure poet - Jorris Buxton. Buxton's character is loosely based on the nineteenth century, romantic poet Walter Savage Landor.[9] Writer and critic Cynthia Ozick praised the novel's skillful narrative and complex characters, writing that *The Journey Abandoned* is "a crowded gallery of carefully delineated portraits, whose innerness is divulged partly through dialogue but far more extensively in passages of cannily analyzed insight."

### Politics

Trilling's politics have been strongly debated, and like much else in his thought may be described as "complex." A much-quoted summary of Trilling's politics is that he wished to:

"[remind] people who prided themselves on being liberals that liberalism was ... a political position which affirmed the value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty." Politically, Trilling was a noted member of the anti-Stalinist left, a position that he maintained to the end of his life.

### Neoconservative

Some, both conservative and liberal, argue that Trilling's views became steadily more conservative over time, and Trilling has been embraced as sympathetic to neoconservatism by neoconservatives (such as Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*), though this embrace was unrequited, Trilling criticizing the New Left (as he had the Old Left), but not embracing neoconservatism. The extent to which Trilling may be identified with neoconservatism continues to be contentious, forming a point of debate in (Rodden 2000).

### Moderate

Trilling has alternatively been characterized as solidly moderate, as evidenced by many statements, ranging from the very title of his novel, *The Middle of the Journey* to a central passage from the novel: "An absolute freedom from responsibility - that much of a child none of us can be. An absolute responsibility - that much of a divine or metaphysical essence none of us is."

Our fate, for better or worse, is political. It is not in itself a happy fate, even when it has an heroic sound. But there is no escape from it and the only possibility of enduring it is to force into our definition of politics every human activity and every subtlety of every human activity.

Indeed, early in *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling declared his interest in what he called "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet," except that for him "bloody" meant embattled rather than violent; and literature, because of its intrinsic humanism, had more wisdom to offer than the activist and morally troubling world of politics. It is this interplay of literature, politics, and ideas that gives Trilling's work a scope and a richness not found in most literary criticism. Still, it is as a literary critic that he gained his reputation and must be judged. John Rodden recognizes this priority by structuring his collection around Trilling's books chronologically, with a final section devoted to more general "Appreciations, Influences, Controversies, Reconsiderations."

Trilling added to the novel treated questions regarding a character called Gifford Maxim, who was based on Whittaker Chambers, a Columbia College student at the same time as Trilling.



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Chambers subsequently joined the Soviet espionage apparatus, and Trilling encountered him again when, after breaking with the Communist Party, Chambers sought to reestablish a public identity to make it harder for the party to assassinate him.

### Liberal

In his earlier years, Trilling wrote for and in the liberal tradition, explicitly rejecting conservatism; from the preface to his *The Liberal Imagination*, 1950, emphasis added to much-quoted last line: In the United States at this time Liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.

The fear of assassination is important to the novel's portrayal of the "liberal imagination" because the Crooms do not believe the danger Maxim fears is real, and indeed are shocked by Maxim's belief that the Communist Party would be capable of such wickedness. One of the shrewdest of Trilling's devices is to find in this mistaken trustfulness an occasion for Laskell's discovery of the denials of reality associated with radical political convictions. There are still more central grounds for this discovery, including the unwillingness of the Crooms, the hero's hosts, to consider the fact of death—real indeed to their guest, who has recently recovered from a very dangerous illness.

The novel constituted a grave and inclusive attack on the pieties of the middleclass radicalism of its time. It was not received with universal applause. The chief of the contemporary pieties it offended was the faith among Communist sympathizers that the world could be remade in accord with our personal demands. When John Laskell steps into Nancy Croom's flower bed of cosmos while trying to talk to her about death, Nancy says, "John, get out of my cosmos!" And while she thinks she is talking about flowers, we, like Laskell, realize that she is acting to cancel the reality of a friend's emotions if they interfere with her attempt to deny death through political hope.

Trilling notes that the English edition of his novel was better received. Perhaps the English of 1947 took it for granted that ideas had a clear relation to the intellectual groups and social classes that adopted them. An English identity was achieved after one had willy-nilly accepted the fact of one's social origin and the social milieu—perhaps a very different one—that one had come to occupy. It is harder for Americans, born more like gods of their own creation, to accept the idea of an intellectual milieu or a social class, except as something altogether foreign. Americans do not have much feeling for the social comedy of ideas.



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Some people were convinced that Trilling was an anglophile. In fact he rejected the offer of a distinguished post in England. His American identity was precious to him, and it bore on his views on the citizen's duty.

In England, even more than in this country, it was commonly held in the 1950s that one must not name names when questioned by the government about someone's Communist sympathy or affiliation. Trilling, on the contrary, held that it was not dishonorable for an American citizen to answer such questions. A number of his colleagues in the College, including good friends of his, differed sharply, according to Diana Trilling, but one can infer from the introduction to *The Middle of the Journey* that he never changed his view.

### College Loyalties

Early in their careers in the College, Trilling and Jacques Barzun '26C '32GSAS taught the Senior Colloquium, and I was lucky enough to take the course with them in 1936-37. For me (and I am

sure it was true of others also) the experience was unique and unforgettable. The College of those years had a splendid staff, and many students had occasion to rejoice as I did.

Trilling was to become a friend when I began teaching in the College in 1939, and it may be useful to note something I found characteristic in him. He took teaching very seriously. For him it was an occasion to judge, to offer praise, and to seek to see what powers the student had and how they were being employed. If they were being wasted or misapplied he made it his responsibility to try to help. When I became his colleague and friend I was on occasion privy to these efforts and to his sustained fidelity to the obligations of teaching.

In those years the College offered a three-year course in English literature from the earliest times to the end of the nineteenth century. Trilling taught the third year over a long period. The course embraced works of the Romantics and the Victorians, and one of Trilling's happiest achievements is the essay on Keats he published in *The Opposing Self*. Another figure by whom he set great store was Wordsworth and there was an annual struggle with an often resistant group of juniors and seniors to win them to recognition of the poet's powers. Among the Victorians, the novels and tales of Henry James stood high for Trilling. His interest in the cultural office of the novel carried over to the twentieth century, as many of his essays attest.

One of the recollections of my colleague that stands out for me is how persistently thoughtful he was about the ongoing affairs of the College wing of the department. His heart was there. He taught graduate courses and supervised dissertations, but the College had his deepest loyalty.

The reader of this brief account of a remarkable man, whose abilities exceeded those of any other I have ever encountered, might be excused for wondering how he exhibited the powers I saw in him. I despair of conveying more than a suggestion of the fascination offered by a particular work. *Sincerity and Authenticity* consists of six lectures delivered at Harvard in the spring of 1970. He traces the idea of sincerity through the 400 years of its employment in England and elsewhere and its fascinating permutations from Rousseau and Diderot (in his *Rameau's Nephew*) through Goethe and Hegel, to such amazing cultural landmarks as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Among other things, he teaches us what an extraordinary wealth of meaning is contained in the customary signature of our letters, "Sincerely yours." How authenticity then arose as a standard and at what cost we learn in the lectures that followed. The final lecture in the series concludes with extraordinary force. The chapter is called "The Authentic Unconscious," and the term "unconscious," though it had been Freud's, is not here used with reference to psychoanalysis but to a transformation in its meaning, which reaches its apogee in a shocking moment of the 1960s. Trilling quotes two British psychiatrists, David Cooper and R.D. Laing. In an introduction to the English translation of Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie*, Cooper had written: "What madness is is a form of vision that destroys itself by its own choice of oblivion in the face of existing forms of social tactics and strategy. Madness, for instance, is a matter of voicing the realization that I am (or you are) Christ." Trilling characterizes Cooper's view as follows: "So far from being an illness, a deprivation of any kind, madness is health fully realized at last." He then quotes Laing as saying that "true sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality."

### Trilling Comments

"Who that has had experience of our social reality will doubt its alienated condition? And who that has thought of his experience in the light of certain momentous speculations made over the last two centuries, of which a few have been touched on in these pages, will not be disposed to find some seed of cogency in a view that proposes an antinomian reversal of all accepted values, of all received realities?

"But who that has spoken, or tried to speak, with a psychotic friend will consent to betray the masked pain-his bewilderment and solitude-by making it the paradigm of liberation from the imprisoning falsehoods of an alienated social reality? Who that finds intelligible the sentences

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which describe madness (to use the word that Kant prefers) in terms of transcendence and charisma will fail to penetrate to the great refusal of human connection that they express, the appalling belief that human existence is made authentic by the possession of a power, or the persuasion of its possession, which is not to be qualified or restricted by the co-ordinate existence of any fellow man?

"Perhaps exactly because the thought is assented to so facilely, so without what used to be called seriousness, it might seem that no expression of disaffection from the social existence was ever so desperate as this eagerness to say that authenticity of personal being is achieved through an ultimate isolateness and through the power that this is presumed to bring. The falsities of an alienated social reality are rejected in favor of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ- but with none of the inconveniences of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished."

The fierceness of this denunciation is unmatched in Trilling, but it conveys the passion he everywhere brought to considering the relation between emotions and ideas.

As I approach my conclusion I must not fail to remark that Trilling wished to speak for and to everyone, and not for a particular sect or party. He sought to do this by speaking on each occasion from the freedom of a judgment unconstrained by doctrine.

I am reminded of one of my happiest memories of him. John Thompson 1902C and I loved fly-fishing and taught Trilling to fish. One day a shout of pleasure from a neighboring pool greeted us. It was his celebration of his first ten-inch trout.

### **10.3 Trilling Major Works**

The *Opposing Self* (1955) is titled for an observation Trilling attributes to Hegel, who had held that in the eighteenth century individuals came to oppose the self to the culture in which it had grown. This conception of the self was to be a central theme in Trilling's later work, particularly in his discussion of authenticity in *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

*A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956) prints the introductions Trilling had done for *The Reader's Subscription*, a book club headed by W.H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, and Trilling. *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) presents the lectures Trilling delivered as Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard in 1970. Trilling had earlier edited an anthology called *The Experience of Literature*, published in 1967. The prefaces to the individual selections it contains comprise a volume in the Uniform edition. The present writer suggests that the original anthology, including Trilling's prefaces together with the works they deal with, make an excellent introduction to the powers and interests of Trilling himself.

*Beyond Culture* (1965) contains powerful essays on Jane Austen's *Emma*, on Isaac Babel, on the modern view of pleasure, and on other topics. One of these, "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," is more often discussed than others nowadays because it is thought to have a particular importance for students of literature. This essay demands nothing less than full attention, and I can't attempt to give it that here, except to note that those whose lives are exclusively devoted to money and success find little sanction or excuse in its pages.

Of this book as a whole, Diana Trilling, the editor, notes, "A central enterprise of the volume is its search for a way out of the adversary culture which will not preclude a genuine experience of life. One such rescue from the tyrannies of contemporary cultural subversion Trilling finds in Freud's tragic acceptance of the biologically given." The speech Trilling addressed to the New York Psychoanalytic Society in 1955 gives the volume its title. It was the first occasion on which the members of the society were addressed by someone outside their number. It should be noted that Trilling collaborated with Steven Marcus '48C '61GSAS to produce a one-volume version of Ernest Jones's three-volume biography of Freud.

Trilling also wrote a number of short stories, and Mrs. Trilling edited a volume of these for the Uniform edition, with a title drawn from the best known of them, "Of This Time, of That Place." The volume includes the often anthologized "The Other Margaret" as well as a number of stories bearing on Jewishness.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Trilling was ..... .  
 (a) A British literary critic (b) An American literary critic  
 (c) An Irish literary critic (d) None of these
- (ii) Trilling earned his doctorate with a dissertation about ..... .  
 (a) William Shakespear (b) T. S. Eliot  
 (c) Matthw Arnold (d) None of these
- (iii) Trilling was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities to deliver the first Jefferson lecture in ..... .  
 (a) 1972 (b) 1980  
 (c) 1985 (d) 1965
- (iv) Trilling who became an associate professor at Columbia in ..... .  
 (a) 1943 (b) 1944  
 (c) 1945 (d) 1948

### 10.4 Summary

- Trilling discusses the relationships that exist between Freud and literature. Beginning with the statement that psychoanalysis may be viewed as a culmination of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement in literature, Trilling develops a striking thesis that revolves around the delineation of three Romantic hallmarks: devotion to research into the self, recognition of the hidden element in human behavior, and the concept of the mind as a divisible entity. While all these items are undoubtedly part of the Freudian base, Trilling suggests that Freud added a rationalistic anti-Romantic construct to the system, viewing the final aim of psychoanalysis as control of the impulses-- "where id was, there shall ego be." In critical, but not unsympathetic fashion, Trilling regards Freud's views on the artist as somewhat narrow and undertakes at some length to reconcile certain contradictions.
- Lionel Trilling was born in Queens, New York City, the son of Fannie (née Cohen), who was from London, and David Trilling, a tailor from Bialystok in Poland. His family was Jewish. In 1921, he graduated from DeWitt Clinton High School, and, at age sixteen, entered Columbia University, thus beginning a perpetual association with the university. In 1925, he graduated from Columbia, and, in 1926, earned a Master of Arts degree. He taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and at Hunter College. In 1932, he taught literature at Columbia University. In 1938, he earned his doctorate with a dissertation about Matthew Arnold, that he later published.
- Trilling wrote one novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), about an affluent Communist couple's encounter with a Communist defector. (Trilling later acknowledged that the character was inspired by his Columbia College compatriot and contemporary Whittaker Chambers). His short stories include "The Other Margaret." Otherwise, he wrote essays and reviews, in which he reflected on literature's ability to challenge the morality and conventions of the culture.
- Trilling has alternatively been characterized as solidly moderate, as evidenced by many statements, ranging from the very title of his novel, *The Middle of the Journey* to a central passage from the novel: "An absolute freedom from responsibility - that much of a child none of us can be. An absolute responsibility - that much of a divine or metaphysical essence none of us is."

Notes

### 10.5 Key-Words

1. Realism : A descriptive term particularly associated with the nineteenth century novel to refer to the idea that texts appear to represent 'the word as it really is.'

### 10.6 Review Questions

1. Explain the life and works of Lionel Trilling.
2. What are the major works of Trilling?
3. Briefly explain the literary works of Trilling.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (b)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (a)                      (iv) (c)

### 10.7 Further Readings



Books

1. Hutcheon, Linda A poetics of postmodernism, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, London: Longman, 1972.
4. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh (eds.) A Modern Literary Theory: A Reader, 3rd edition, London: Arnold, 1999.
5. Sethuraman, V.S. and Ramaswamy (eds.) The English Critical Tradition, Volume II, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1977.
6. Seturaman, V.S. (ed.) Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008.

## Unit 11: Freud and Literature – Lionel Trilling: Detailed Study

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Freud and Literature.
- Discuss Trilling Views on Freud and Literature.

### Introduction

Trilling discusses the relationships that exist between Freud and literature. Beginning with the statement that psychoanalysis may be viewed as a culmination of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement in literature, Trilling develops a striking thesis that revolves around the delineation of three Romantic hallmarks: devotion to research into the self, recognition of the hidden element in human behavior, and the concept of the mind as a divisible entity. While all these items are undoubtedly part of the Freudian base, Trilling suggests that Freud added a rationalistic anti-Romantic construct to the system, viewing the final aim of psychoanalysis as control of the impulses - "where id was, there shall ego be." In critical, but not unsympathetic fashion, Trilling regards Freud's views on the artist as somewhat narrow and undertakes at some length to reconcile certain contradictions. A picture of the difference between the creative artist and the neurotic ultimately emerges; the former in command of his fantasies, the latter possessed by them. Trilling feels that Freud's conception of the mind as imagistic "naturalizes" poetry. The entire Freudian depiction of the unconscious both opens and complicates the world for the artist, and Freudian man is seen as a "creature of far more dignity and far more interest than the man which any other modern system has been able to conceive--an inextricable tangle of culture and biology."

### 11.1 Text – Freud and Literature

#### I

The Freudian approach to psychology is, Trilling argues, the "only systematic account of the human mind" which is comparable "in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power" to the "mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries". To pass from the reading of a great literary work to a treatise of academic psychology is to pass from one order of perception to another, but the human nature of the Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art.

This is why psychoanalysis has had a great impact on the study of literature. Of course, the effect is "reciprocal, and the effect of Freud upon literature has been no greater than the effect of literature



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upon Freud". As Freud himself admitted, the "poets and philosophers before me uncovered the unconscious" , what he "discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied".

Trilling argues that what is at stake here is less "particular influences" than a "whole Zeitgeist, a direction of thought". He traces it in particular to a widely admired text, which Freud himself cited approvingly, Diderot's Rameau's Nephew (1762). Trilling sees in it a "perception which is to be the common characteristic of both Freud and Romanticism, the perception of the hidden element of human nature and of the opposition between the hidden and the visible". This "idea of the hidden thing went forward to become one of the dominant notions of the age" in the work of Rousseau, Burke, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schiller, and even others later like Arnold and Mill who were "aware of the depredations that reason might make on the affective life". Autobiography, an important element of this "tradition", hints at the way in which the mind progressively became more complex. The Romantic poets, "making poetry by what seems to them almost a freshly discovered faculty, find that this new power may be conspired against by other agencies of the mind".



*Did u know?* Psychoanalysis, he contends, is "one of the culminations of the Romanticist literature of the nineteenth century", suggesting a "contradiction in the idea of a science standing upon the shoulders of a literature which avows itself inimical to science".

Trilling proceeds to remark on the obsessions of the period with "children, women, peasants, and savages, whose mental life, it is felt, is less overlaid than that of the educated adult male by the proprieties of social habit" , the rise of the bildungsroman in the wake of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister and the attendant "revolution in morals" and the view that "we may not judge a man by any single moment in his life without taking into account the determining past and the expiating and fulfilling future".

Trilling says that the "further we look the more literary affinities to Freud we find". He mentions the increasing demands for and discussions of a "sexual revolution" by Shelley, Schlegel, Sand, Ibsen, Schopenhauer, Stendahl and others. Again and again we see the effective, utilitarian ego being relegated to an inferior position and a plea being made on behalf of the anarchic and self-indulgent id. We find the energetic exploitation of the idea of the mind as a divisible thing, one part of which can contemplate and mock the other.

Trilling lists Dostoevsky's emphasis on ambivalence, Novalis' "preoccupation with the death wish", the "fascination by the horrible" in Shelley, Poe and Baudelaire, the pervasive interest in dreams on the part of thinkers like Nerval, and the concern with "metaphor" in Rimbaud and the later Symbolists, "metaphor becoming less and less communicative as it approaches the relative autonomy of the dream life".

If Freud is a product of this zeitgeist, Trilling wonders in turn "what it is that Freud added that the tendency of literature itself would not have developed without him" . Proust's *Les Fleurs du mal* springs to mind, suggesting as it does an "enterprise of psychoanalysis" , not least in terms of its method: the "investigation of sleep, of sexual deviation, of the way of association, the almost obsessive interest in metaphor" . Though writers like Proust denied even having read Freud, Freud's impact on the study of literature is enormous. A psychoanalytically-oriented criticism offers students of literature a "lively sense of its latent and ambiguous meanings, as it were, as indeed it is, a being no less alive and contradictory than the man who created it" . It has had an important impact on literary biography in particular where, notwithstanding the "dangers of theoretical systematisation" of which no one is more aware than the psychoanalytically-inclined critic, the goal is "not that of exposing the secret shame of the writer and limiting the meaning of his work, but, on the contrary, that of finding grounds for sympathy with the writer and for increasing the possible significances of the work". Many contemporaneous writers have cited their debts to Freud: the Surrealists, Kafka (who "explored the Freudian conceptions of guilt and punishment, of the dream, and of the fear of the father" , Thomas Mann, and James Joyce, among others.

## II

## Notes

Much of Freud's thought, Trilling argues, has "significant affinity with the anti-rationalist element of the Romanticist tradition". However, "much of his system is militantly rationalistic". Thomas Mann is wrong, he argues, to stress that the "'Apollonian,' the rationalistic, side of psychoanalysis is, while certainly important and wholly admirable, somehow secondary and even accidental". Though Mann, "gives us a Freud who is committed to the 'night side' of life", Trilling argues, the "rationalistic element of Freud is foremost; before everything else he is positivistic". The "interpreter of dreams came to medical science" by way of Goethe's scientific "disquisition on Nature", not via his Faust. For Freud, "positivistic rationalism . . . is the very form and pattern of intellectual virtue". Such an understanding is necessary for an appreciation of "Freud's attitude to art".

The aim of psychoanalysis, he says, is the control of the night side of life. It is 'to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen the field of vision, and so to extend the organisation of the id.' 'Where id was,' - that is, where all the irrational, non-logical, pleasure-seeking dark forces were - 'there ego shall be,' that is, intelligence and control.

Freud, by contrast, would never have accepted the role which Mann seems to give him as the legitimiser of myth and the dark irrational ways of the mind. If Freud discovered the darkness for science he never endorsed it. On the contrary, his rationalism supports all the ideas of the Enlightenment that deny validity to myth or religion; he holds to a simple materialism, to a simple determinism, to a rather simple sort of epistemology. No great scientist of our day has thundered so articulately and so fiercely against all those who would sophisticate with metaphysics the scientific principles that were good enough for the nineteenth century. "Conceptualism or pragmatism is anathema to him through the greater part of his intellectual career".

For Trilling, Freud's "rationalistic positivism" has both strengths and weaknesses. Its "strength is the fine, clear tenacity of his positive aims, the goal of therapy, the desire to bring to men a decent measure of earthly happiness". Its weakness has to do with the "often naive scientific principles which characterise his early thought" and which consisted largely in "claiming for his theories a perfect correspondence with an external reality" that cannot be substantiated.

Freud has "much to tell us about art", Trilling stresses, and about writers who provide "specific emotional insights and observations" derived from an understanding of the "part played by the hidden motives". For this reason, "literary men" are the "precursors and coadjutors of his own science". Art, Freud writes, is a "substitute gratification" and an "illusion in contrast to reality". Its effect is "almost always harmless and beneficent" and is something of a "narcotic" and "shares the characteristics of the dream, whose element of distortion Freud calls a 'sort of inner dishonesty'". The artist is "in the same category with the neurotic".

Trilling is of the view that it is understandable how Freud, "unprotected by an adequate philosophy", comes to these conclusions. Psychoanalytic practice is about helping patients to cope with the seeming reality of their in fact most often unfounded fears and problems:

For Freud there are two ways of dealing with external reality. One is practical, effective, positive; this is the way of the conscious self, of the ego which must be made independent of the super-ego and extend its organisation over the id, and it is the right way. The antithetical way may be called . . . the 'fictional' way. Instead of doing something about, or to, external reality, the individual who uses this way does something to, or about, his affective states. The most common and 'normal' example of this is daydreaming, in which we give ourselves a certain pleasure by imagining our difficulties solved or our desires gratified. Then, too, sleeping dreams are, in much more complicated ways, and even though quite unpleasant, at the service of this same 'fictional' activity. And in ways yet more complicated and yet more unpleasant, the actual neurosis from which our patient suffers deals with an external reality which the mind considers still more unpleasant than the painful neurosis itself.

These are, for Freud, the "polar extremes of reality and illusion" or, more precisely, "practical reality and neurotic illusion". Reality basically "means what is there", while illusion "means a response to what is not there". The "essentially Freudian view assumes that the mind, for good as

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well as bad, helps create its reality by selection and evaluation. In this view, reality is malleable and subject to creation". However, Freud also shares another conception of the mind that is derived from his "therapeutic-practical assumptions" and according to which the "mind deals with a reality which is quite fixed and static, a reality that is wholly 'given' and not (to use a phrase of Dewey's) 'taken'".

Trilling is baffled why Freud insists on the second view even though the "reality to which he wishes to reconcile the neurotic patient is, after all, a 'taken' and not a 'given' reality", to be precise, the "reality of social life and value, conceived and maintained by the human mind and will. Love, morality, honour, esteem - these are the components of a created reality". From this point of view, "we must call most of the activities and satisfactions of the ego illusions", just as art is an illusion, which is not something that Freud wants to do at all. Trilling then asks what is the difference between the dream and neurosis, on the one hand, and art on the other. Unconscious processes are at work in both, they share the element of fantasy. But the difference between them is that the "poet is in command of his own fantasy, while it is exactly the mark of the neurotic that he is possessed by his fantasy". Secondly, the "illusions of art are made to serve the purpose of a closer and truer relation with reality". Freud's "assumption of the almost exclusively hedonistic nature and purpose of art bar him from the perception of this". Freud does admit that there is a distinction between the artist and the neurotic in that the former "knows how to find a way back from the world of imagination and 'once more get a firm foothold in reality'". But this means simply, in Trilling's view, that the artist returns to the real world "once he suspends the practice of his art". All in all, Freud does not deny to art its function and its usefulness; it has a therapeutic effect in releasing mental tension; it serves the cultural purpose of acting as a 'substitute gratification' to reconcile men to the sacrifices that made for culture's sake; it promotes the social sharing of highly valued emotional experiences; and it recalls men to their cultural ideas.

### III

Trilling summarises his argument by saying that his point has been that "Freud's ideas could tell us something about art" but that "Freud's very conception of art is inadequate". Freud, Trilling suggests, is very aware of the limits of the "application of the analytic method to specific works of art". However, Freud does believe that it accomplishes two things:

"explain the 'inner meanings' of the work of art and explain the temperament of the artist as man". Freud's and, later, Jones' interpretation of Hamlet, for example, "undertakes not only the clearing up of the mystery of Hamlet's character, but also the discovery of 'the clue to much of the deeper workings of Shakespeare's mind'", as well as "what Freud calls 'the mystery of its effect'". Given that, according to Freud, the "meaning of a dream is its intention" and that the meaning of a play is also its intention, Jones sought to "discover what it was that Shakespeare intended to say about Hamlet". This was "wrapped by the author in a dreamlike obscurity because it touched so deeply both his personal life and the moral life of the world". What Freud and Jones asserted is that "what Shakespeare intended to say is that Hamlet cannot act because he is incapacitated by the guilt he feels at his unconscious attachment to his mother". Similarly, Freud asserts that the "meaning of King Lear is to be found in the tragic refusal of an old man to 'renounce love, choose death, and make friends with the necessity of dying'". However, in Trilling's view, this is "not the meaning of King Lear any more than the Oedipus motive is the meaning of Hamlet".

Trilling is of this view because he believes that there is "no single meaning to any work of art" as attested to by "historical and personal experience":

Changes in historical context and in personal mood change the meaning of a work and indicate to us that artistic understanding is not a question of fact but of value. Even if the author's intention were, as it cannot be precisely determinable, the meaning of a work cannot lie in the author's intention alone.

It must also lie in its effect. . . . In short, the audience partly determines the meaning of the work. Freud seems to hint at this but assumes that the effect of a play like Hamlet is "single and brought

about solely by the 'magical' power of the Oedipus motive to which, unconsciously, we so violently respond". The thing is, though, that Hamlet's appeal and impact is historically and culturally variable.

Trilling points out that just as Bacon "remarked that experiment may twist nature on the rack to wring out its secrets", so too "criticism may use any instruments upon a work of art to find its meanings". However, one form of "research into the mind of the artist is simply not practicable": the "investigation of his unconscious intention as it exists apart from the work itself". It is difficult enough to determine the "artist's statement of his conscious intention", therefore how "much less can we know from his unconscious intention considered as something apart from the whole work?". The answer: "very little that can be called conclusive or scientific". The biggest hindrance is the absence of the author himself: we must interpret the symbols which comprise his 'dream-text' without reference to the "dreamer's free association with the multitudinous details of his dream".

Trilling then turns his attention to the view that an artwork reveals much about the mind of the artist which in turn sheds light on the artwork. Jones credits, on the basis of only the flimsiest of evidence, Hamlet with more importance in Shakespeare's oeuvre than it necessarily has and, on these grounds, proceeds to claim that there is a link between the "inner meaning of the play" and the "deeper workings of Shakespeare's mind".

Trilling hastens to add that it is not his intention to dismiss a psychoanalytic reading. Far from it. Rather, he is of the view that the best practitioners of psychoanalytic criticism are those who have "surrendered the early pretensions . . . to deal 'scientifically' with literature". More recent work "pretends not to 'solve' but only to illuminate the subject". Such a nuanced approach produces interpretations that are not "exclusive of other meanings" for the simple reason that it does not assume that "there is a reality to which the play stands in the relation that a dream stands to the wish that generates it and from which it is inseparable".

#### IV

What then, Trilling wonders, does Freud contribute to our understanding of art? The value of Freud's approach lies in his "whole conception of the mind". Freudian psychology "makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind". The mind is largely a "poetrymaking organ", notwithstanding the fact that "between the unconscious mind and the finished poem there supervene the social intention and the formal control of the conscious mind". "Freud has not merely naturalised poetry; he has discovered its status as a pioneer settler, and he sees it as a method of thought". Though he sees poetry as "unreliable and ineffective for conquering reality", he is forced to make use of it himself, "as when he speaks of the topography of the mind and tells us with a kind of defiant apology that the metaphors of spatial relationship which he is using are really most inexact since the mind is not a thing of space at all". Vico in the eighteenth century "spoke of the metaphorical, imagistic language of the early stages of culture; it was left to Freud to discover how, in a scientific age, we still feel and think in figurative formations, and to create, what psychoanalysis is, a science of tropes, of metaphor and its variants, synecdoche and metonymy [sic]". Moreover, Freud shows how the mind, in one of its parts, could work without logic, yet not without that directing purpose, that control of intent from which . . . logic springs. For the unconscious mind works without the syntactical conjunctions which are logic's essence; It recognises no because, no therefore, no but; such ideas as similarity, agreement, and community are expressed in dreams imagistically by compressing the elements into a unity. The unconscious mind in its struggle with the conscious always turns from the general to the concrete and finds the tangible trifle more congenial than the large abstraction.

Freud discovered in the very organisation of the mind those mechanisms by which art makes its effects, such devices as the condensations of meanings and the displacement of accent. In addition to this, Trilling writes, there are two other elements which have great bearing on art and its study.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Trilling contends, Freud offers both a "speculative attempt to solve a perplexing problem in clinical analysis" and an important contribution to the study of catharsis in tragedy à la Aristotle. Freud stumbles here upon certain facts that contradict his earlier theory that all dreams "have the intention of fulfilling the dreamer's wishes. They are in the service of what Freud calls the pleasure principle, which is opposed to the reality principle". He was forced

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to reconsider this view of dreams in the light of traumatic events like shell-shock where the patient "recurred in his dreams to the very situation, distressing as it was, which had precipitated his neurosis". There is no "hedonistic intent" to and very little distortion of such dreams in that the patient "recurred to the terrible initiatory situation with great literalness". This was also true of children's games which, in some cases, "far from fulfilling wishes, seemed to concentrate upon the representation of those aspects of the child's life which were most unpleasant and threatening to his happiness". To solve these problems, Freud posits the existence of a "repetition-compulsion which goes beyond the pleasure principle", the "intent" of which is the "developing of fear". That is, the dream is the effort to reconstruct the bad situation in order that the failure to meet it may be recouped; in these dreams there is no obscured intent to evade but only an attempt to meet the situation, to make a new effort of control. And in the play of children it seems to be that 'the child repeats even the unpleasant experiences because through his own activity he gains a far more thorough mastery of the strong impression than was possible by mere passive experience.'

There are implications of this for our understanding of tragedy. The pleasure involved therein is an "ambiguous one", partly a "glossing over of terror with beautiful language rather than the evacuation of it", partly the "stark" expression of this terror. However, there is another "function for tragedy": "tragedy is used as the homeopathic administration of pain to inure ourselves to the greater pain which life will force upon us". From this perspective, tragedy affords us a "sense of active mastery" of an unpalatable reality. Also in this essay, Freud suggests that there is a "human drive which makes of death the final and desired goal", a view of "grandeur" and "tragic courage in acquiescence to fate".

Freud offers, in Trilling's view, a vision of man allied to that of Copernicus and Darwin and partly designed, seemingly, to undermine human pride. Yet, he avers, the "Freudian man is . . . a creature of far more dignity and far more interest" than any other modern model. For Freud, man is not to be conceived by any simple formula (such as sex) but is rather an inextricable tangle of culture and biology. And not being simple, he is not simply good; he has . . . a kind of hell within him from which rise everlastingly the impulses which threaten his civilisation. "His desire for man is only that he should be human, and to this end his science is devoted".

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Trilling discusses the relationships that exist between Freud and ..... .
  - (a) language
  - (b) literature
  - (c) poetry
  - (d) none of these
- (ii) Trilling proceeds to remark on the obsessions of the period with ..... whose mental life, it is felt, is less overlaid than that of the educated adult male by the properties of social habit.
  - (a) children
  - (b) women
  - (c) peasants and savages
  - (d) all of these
- (iii) The aim of psychoanalysis is the control of the ..... .
  - (a) bright side of life
  - (b) bad side of life
  - (c) night side of life
  - (d) none of these
- (iv) For Trilling, Freud's rationalistic positivism has both ..... .
  - (a) good and bad
  - (b) day and night
  - (c) strengths and weaknesses
  - (d) positive and negative

**11.2 Summary**

- Lionel Trilling's masterly essays mapped the terrain where literary, political, and social questions overlapped. His friend and colleague Quentin Anderson also remembers him as a devoted teacher and mentor who was fiercely loyal to Columbia.
- Liberal politics, Trilling argued, while itself rooted in sentiment and concerned with asserting the importance of human emotion, also tended to deny the concrete reality and individuality



of human feeling and imagination. The study of literature might help to correct this tendency. Trilling had found an understanding of the tie between moral principles and the imagination in the English novelist E.M. Forster, the subject of a book Trilling published in 1943. But the first full development of his views on the relations between politics and the imagination appears in *The Liberal Imagination*, which drove his views home and had an effect no less than national. Insofar as liberalism depends on a belief that the primary political reality is realized in individual human beings, could Americans be called "liberal" when we substituted abstract zeal for an awareness of our existing human situation? Trilling's most concise treatment of this contradiction comes from an introduction to his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*: "This negation of the human situation was one aspect of an ever more imperious and bitter refusal to consent to the conditioned nature of human existence."

- The volume opens with essays on minor American writers and then moves with greater power and interest to a theme Trilling commanded, "Freud and Literature," and thereafter to the authority of the great essays of the 1940s and 1950s, "Manners, Morals and the Novel" and "Art and Fortune." Along the way current concerns are visited, as in the essay on *The Kinsey Report*, which deals with prevailing attitudes toward sexuality, and a study of current little magazines, including *Partisan Review*. All in all, the collection announced and established a new critical eminence among us and was an enormous success. (Though it was of greatest value, perhaps, to those whom it led to take a continuing interest in Trilling's works, many such readers eventually came to cherish his later works more.)

### 11.3 Key-Words

1. Oedipus complex : A reference in Freud's theory to the unconscious wish of every (male) child to have sex with its mother and to eliminate its father.
2. Phallus : A term in psychoanalytic theory for the authority invested in the male. In Lacan it is the symbol of power associated with 'the law' of the male penis. It is rather the signifier of sexual difference in general.

### 11.4 Review Questions

1. What does this Lionel Trilling quote mean in relation to the novel 1984.
2. What is the ID?
3. Discuss Trilling's Freud and Literature.

#### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (b)                      (ii) (d)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (c)

### 11.5 Further Readings



Books

1. Hutcheon, Linda *A poetics of postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, London: Longman, 1972.
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## Unit 12: Freud and Literature – Lionel Trilling: Critical Appreciation

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Trilling's view on Freud and Literature.
- Discuss Plot and major characters of Freud and Literature.

### Introduction

Recognized as one of the foremost American literary critics of the twentieth century, Trilling also wrote several short stories that were published in periodicals during his lifetime. In 1979, four years after his death, five of his best stories were collected and published as *Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories*. Reviewers praised the stories as complex tales that explore characteristic thematic concerns of Trilling's fictional and nonfictional work. Although *Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories* has garnered little critical attention, commentators have commended the volume as a notable and underrated work.

Trilling's first book played a crucial role in drawing international attention to his intellectual gifts and marking him as, in Rodden's phrase, "a rising star." The extreme, almost unanimous praise for his 1939 biography of Matthew Arnold, the dominant figure in English criticism in the late nineteenth century, surprised everyone, including Trilling himself. One of England's leading men of letters, the novelist, critic, and editor John Middleton Murry, opened his review on a mock note of hurt national pride.

Mr. Trilling, who is an American professor, has written the best -- the most comprehensive and critical -- book on Matthew Arnold that exists. It is a little saddening to us that this particular glory should fall to the United States. Another British reviewer called the book "the most brilliant piece of biographical criticism issued in English during the last ten years."

But it was the review by Edmund Wilson that pleased Trilling most. Wilson was at the time indisputably America's leading critic, regarded by Trilling as a model for joining literary, political, and social commentary with an enviable lucidity of style. At one point Trilling had become despondent about writing on a subject so remote from the Great Depression and the impending war. Wilson, then only a casual acquaintance, urged him to finish the book, insisting that the subject was a worthy one. On its publication Wilson, notoriously not given to easy praise, called it "one of the first critical studies of any solidity or scope by an American of his generation."

The biography succeeded in large part because Arnold offered Trilling a particularly sympathetic subject: an author who combined the roles of creative artist (poet rather than novelist), literary critic, and social-political thinker. Both men knew the internal tension felt by those who were at the same time cultural conservatives and political liberals. And Arnold's brooding meditation on the displacement of religious faith by science, in his famous poem "Dover Beach" ("we are here as on a darkling plain ... Where ignorant armies clash by night"), anticipated a similar disposition toward melancholy and fatalism which surfaced in Trilling's later work.

The Arnold biography won for Trilling the tenure at Columbia University that the English-department faculty had earlier withheld because some believed that a Jew could not properly appreciate English literature. After the university's president, an ardent Anglophile, declared himself deeply impressed by the book, the faculty reversed itself; ultimately Trilling became one of only two department faculty members to receive the prestigious title "university professor." By the 1950s, as a former student recalls in Rodden's collection, "Trilling was already something of a legendary figure, the intellectual conscience of the undergraduate English Department ... a link to the turbulent world of the New York intellectuals." His next book, a study of E. M. Forster's novels (1943), provided Trilling with an occasion to test the approach to literature that he later developed more fully in *The Liberal Imagination*. Forster was at the time moderately admired in England but little known in the United States. Trilling's enthusiastic portrait stimulated a reissue of Forster's novels and a new assessment of his importance. The book's famous opening sentence has a deceptive simplicity that startles the reader into sudden attention.

E. M. Forster is for me the only living novelist who can be read again and again and who, after each reading, gives me what few writers can give us after our first days of novel-reading, the sensation of having learned something.

In recent years moviegoers could experience a similar sensation without actually reading the novels. Four of the five, written from 1905 to 1924, have been made into fairly faithful films: *A Room With a View*, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Howards End*, and *A Passage to India*. (*The Longest Journey* has not yet reached the screen.) What Trilling found compelling in Forster's novels was their distinctive approach to moral issues. He wrote,

All novelists deal with morality, but not all novelists ... are concerned with moral realism, which is not the awareness of morality itself but of the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life.

Trilling admired Forster because he was a liberal who resisted liberal shibboleths. For example, his novels often touch on the idea of class, but class is not defined primarily in terms of income. In *Howards End* especially, Trilling wrote, Forster "shows the conflicting truths of the idea -- that on the one hand class is character, soul and destiny, and that on the other hand class is not finally determining." But here class tensions operate within the middle class on three levels: at the extremes are the wealthy businessman disdainful of art and weakness and the lowly clerk with a taste for poetry, and between them are the two intellectual sisters. The scene at the novel's end of the happy child of the clerk and the younger sister playing in a hayfield symbolized for Forster the secret of the good life: "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height." This sudden mood of transcendence, bursting out of Forster's otherwise unpretentious conversational style, shows the novelist, as Trilling approvingly put it, "content with human possibility and content with its limitations."

## 12.1 Text – Freud And Literature: Critical Appreciation

### I

The Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind which, in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries. To pass from the reading of a great literary work to a treatise of academic psychology is to pass from one order of perception to another, but the human nature of the Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art. It is therefore not surprising that the psycho-analytical theory has had a great effect upon literature. Yet the relationship is reciprocal and the

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effect of Freud upon literature has been no greater than the effect of literature upon Freud. When, on the occasion of the celebration of his seventieth birthday, Freud was greeted as the 'discoverer of the unconscious', he corrected the speaker and disclaimed the title. 'The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious ; what I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.'

A lack of specific evidence prevents us from considering the particular literary 'influences' upon the founder of psycho-analysis; , and besides, when we think of the men who so clearly anticipated many of Freud's own ideas-Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, for example-and then learn that he did not read their works until after he had formulated his own theories, we must see that particular influences cannot be in question here but that what we must deal with is nothing less than a whole *Zeitgeist*, a direction of thought. For psycho-analysis is one of the culminations of the Romanticist literature of the nineteenth century. If there is perhaps, a contradiction in the idea of a science standing upon the shoulders of a literature which avows itself inimical to science in so many ways, the contradiction will be resolved if we remember that this literature, despite its avowals, was itself scientific, for it was passionately devoted to a research into the self.

In showing the connection between Freud and this Romanticist tradition, it is difficult to know where to begin, but there might be a certain aptness in starting even back of the tradition, as far back as 1762 with that dialogue of Diderot's called *Rameau's Nephew*. At any rate, certain men at the heart of nineteenth-century thought were agreed in finding a peculiar importance in this brant little work: Goethe translated it, Marx admired it, Hegel-as Marx reminded Engels in the letter which announced that he was sending the book as a gift-praised and expounded it at length, Shaw was impressed by it and Freud himself, as we know from a quotation in his *Introductory Lectures*, read it with the pleasure of agreement.

The dialogue takes place between Diderot himself and a nephew of the famous composer. The protagonist, the younger Rameau, is a despised, outcast, shameless fellow ; Hegel calls him the 'distintegrated consciousness' and credits him with great wit, for it is he who breaks down all the normal social values and makes new combinations with the pieces. As for Diderot, the deuterogonist, he is what Hegel calls the 'honest consciousness', and Hegel considers him reasonable, decent and dull. It is quite clear that the author does not despise his Rameau and does not mean us to ; Rameau is lusty and greedy, arrogant yet self-abasing, perceptive yet 'wrong', like a child-still, Diderot seems actually to be giving the fellow a kind of superiority over himself, as though Rameau represents the elements which, dangerous but wholly necessary, lie beneath the reasonable decorum of social life. It would, perhaps, be pressing too far to find in Rameau Freud's id and in Diderot Freud's ego; yet the connection does suggest itself; and at least we have here the perception which is to be the common characteristic of both Freud and Romanticism, the perception of the hidden element of human nature and of the opposition between the hidden and the visible. From the self-exposure of Rameau to Rousseau's account of his own childhood is no great step; society might ignore or reject the idea of the 'immorality' which lies concealed in the beginning of the career of the 'good' man, just as it might turn away from Blake struggling to expound a psychology which would include the forces beneath the propriety of social man in general, but the idea of the hidden thing went forward to become one of the dominant notions of the age. The hidden element takes many forms and it is not always 'dark' and 'bad'; for, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Burke what was hidden and unconscious was wisdom and power, working even in despite of the conscious intellect, and for Matthew Arnold the mind was fed by streams buried deeper than we can know.

The mind has become far less simple; the devotion to the various forms of autobiography-itself an important fact in the tradition-provides abundant examples of the change that has taken place. Poets, malign poetry by what seem to them almost a freshly discovered faculty, find that this new power may be conspired against by other agencies of the mind and even deprived of its freedom; the names of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Arnold at once occur to us again, and Freud quotes ScMer on the danger to the poet which lies in the merely analytical reason. And it is not only the poets who are threatened; educated and sensitive people throughout Europe become aware of the depredations the reason might make upon the affective life, as in the classic instance of John Stuart Mill.

We must also take into account the preoccupation-it began in the eighteenth century, even in the seventeenth-with children, women, peasants and savages, because their mental life, it is felt, is less overlaid than that of the educated adult male by the pro- pretties of social habit. With this preoccupation goes a concern with education and personal development, so consonant with the historical and evolutionary bias of the time. And we must certainly note the revolution in morals which took place at the instance (we might almost say) of the *ildungsroman*, for in the novels fathered by Wilhelm Meister we get the almost complete identification of author and hero and of reader with both, and this identification suggests a leniency of moral judgement. The autobiographical novel has a further influence upon the moral sensibility by its exploitation of all the modulations of motive and by its hinting that we may not judge a man by any single moment in his life without taking into account the determining past and the expiating and fulfilling future.

It is difficult to know how to go on, for the further we look the more literary affinities to Freud we find, and even if we limit ourselves to bibliography we can at best be incomplete. Yet we must mention the sexual revolution that was being demanded- by Shelley, for example, by the Schlegel of *Lucinde*, by George Sand, and later and more critically by Ibsen; the belief in the sexual origin of art, baldly stated by Tieck, more subtly by Schopenhauer; the investigation of sexual maladjustment by Stendhal, the quality of whose observations on erotic feeling are in the direct line of Freud. Again and again we see the effective, uditarian ego being relegated to an inferior position and the plea being made on behalf of the anarchic and self-indulgent id. We find the energetic exploitation of the idea of the mind as a divisible toling, one part of which can contemplate and mock the other.

It is not a far remove from this to Dostoievsky's brilliant instances of ambivalent feeling. Novalis brings in the preoccupation with the death-wish, and this is linked on the one hand with sleep and, on the other hand, with the perception of the perverse, self-destroying impulses, which in turn leads us to that fascination by the horrible which we find in Shelley, Poe and Baudelaire. And always there is the profound interest in the dream-'Our dreams', said Gerard de Nerval, 'are a second life'-and in the nature of metaphor, which reaches its climax in Rimbaud and the later Symbolists, of metaphor becoming less and less communicative as it approaches the relative autonomy of the dream life. But perhaps we must stop to ask, since these are the components of the *Zeitgeist* from which Freud himself developed, whether it can be said that Freud did indeed produce a wide literary effect?

What is it that Freud added that the tendency of literature itself would not have developed without him? If we were looking for a writer who showed the Freudian influence, Proust would perhaps come to mind as readily as anyone else; the very title of his novel-in French more than in English-suggests an enterprise of psycho-analysis and scarcely less so does his method-the investigation of sleep, of sexual deviation, of the ways of association, the almost obsessive interest in metaphor; at these and at many other points the 'influence' might be shown. Yet I believe it is true that Proust did not read Freud. Or again, exegesis of *The Waste Land* reads remarkably like the interpretation of a dream, yet we know that Eliot's methods were prepared for him not by Freud but by other poets.

Nevertheless, it is of course true that Freud's influence on literature has been very great. Much of it is so pervasive that its extent is scarcely to be determined; in one form or another, frequently in perversions or absurd simplifications, it has been infused into our life and become a component of our culture of which it is now hard to be specifically aware. In biography its effect was sensational but not fortunate. The Freudian biographers were for the most part Guddensterns who seemed to know the pipes but could not pluck out the heart of the mystery. In criticism the situation has been sad, for reasons which I shall try to suggest later in this essay. The names of the creative writers who have been more or less Freudian in tone or assumption would, of course, be legion. Only a relatively small number, however, have made serious use of the Freudian ideas. Freud himself seems to have thought this was as it should be: he is said to have expected very little of the works that were sent to him by writers with inscriptions of gratitude for all they had learned from

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him. The Surrealists have, with a certain inconsistency, depended upon Freud for the 'scientific' sanction of their programme. Kafka, with an apparent awareness of what he was doing, has explored the Freudian conceptions of guilt and punishment, of the dream and of the fear of the father. Thomas Mann, whose tendency, as he himself says, was always in the direction of Freud's interests, has been most susceptible to the Freudian anthropology, finding a special charm in the theories of myths and magical practices. James Joyce, with his interest in the numerous states of receding consciousness, with his use of words as things and of words which point to more than one thing, with his pervading sense of the interrelation and interpenetration of all things, and, not least important, his treatment of fadard themes, has perhaps most thoroughly and consciously exploited Freud's ideas.

## II

Yet although it will be clear enough how much of Freud's thought has significant affinity with the Romanticist tradition, we must see with no less distinctness how much of his system is distantly rationalistic. Thomas Mann is at fault when, in his first essay on Freud, he makes it seem that the 'Apollonian', the rationalistic, side of psycho-analysis is, while certainly important and wholly admirable, somehow secondary and even accidental. He gives us a Freud who is committed to the 'night side' of life. Not at all: the rationalistic element of Freud is foremost; before everything else he is positivistic. If the interpreter of dreams came to medical science through Goethe, as he tells us he did, he entered not by way of the *WuIprrgisnucht* but by the essay which played so important a part in the lives of so many scientists of the nineteenth century, the famous disquisition on Nature.

This correction is needed not only for accuracy but also for any understanding of Freud's attitude to art. And for that understanding we must see how intense is the passion with which Freud believes that positivistic rationalism, in its golden age, pre-Revolutionary purity, is the very form and pattern of intellectual virtue. The aim of psychoanalysis, he says, is the control of the night side of life. It is 'to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of vision, and so to extend the organization of the id'. Where id was, '... that is, where all the irrational, non-logical, pleasure-seeking dark forces were...' there shall ego be, '... that is, intelligence and control. It is', he concludes, with a reminiscence of Faust, 'reclamation work, &e the draining of the Zuyder Zee.' The passage is quoted by Mann when, in toling up the subject of Freud a second time, he does indeed speak of Freud's positivistic programme; but even here the bias induced by Mann's artistic interest in the 'night side' prevents him from giving this aspect of Freud its proper emphasis. Freud would never have accepted the role which Mann seems to give him as the legitimizer of the myth and the dark irrational ways of the mind. If Freud discovered the darkness for science he never endorsed it. On the contrary, his rationalism supports all the ideas of Enlightenment that deny validity to myth or religion; he holds to a simple materialism, to a simple determinism, to a rather limited sort of epistemology. No great scientist of our day has thundered so articulately and so fiercely against all those who would sophisticate with metaphysics the scientific principles that were good enough for the nineteenth century. Conceptualism or pragmatism are anathema to him, and this, when we consider the nature of his own brilliant scientific methods, has surely an element of paradox in it.

From his rationalistic positivism comes much of Freud's strength and all of his weakness. The strength is the fine, clear tenacity of his positive aims, the goal of therapy, the desire to bring to men a decent measure of earthly happiness. But upon the rationalism must also be placed the blame for his rather naive scientific principles which consist largely of claiming for his theories a perfect correspondence with an external reality, a position which, for those who admire Freud, and especially for those who take seriously his views on art, is troublesome in the extreme.

Now Freud has, I believe, much to tell us about art, but whatever is suggestive in him is not to be found in those of his works in which he deals expressly with art itself. Freud is neither insensitive to art-on the contrary-nor does he ever intend to speak of it with contempt. Indeed, he speaks of it with a real tenderness and counts it one of the true charms of the good life. of artists, especially of writers, he speaks with admiration and even a kind of awe, though perhaps what he most



appreciates in literature are specific emotional insights and observations ; he speaks of literary men, because they have understood the part played in life by the hidden motives, as the precursors and coadjutors of his own science.

And yet eventually Freud speaks of art with what we must indeed call contempt. Art, he tells us, is a 'substitute gratification', and as such is 'an illusion in contrast to reality'. Unlike most Illusions, however, art is 'almost always harmless and beneficent' for the reason that 'it does not seek to be anything but an illusion. Save in the case of a few people who are, one might say, obsessed by Art, it never dares make any attack on the realm of reality.' One of its chief functions is to serve as a 'narcotic'. It shares the characteristics of the dream, whose element of distortion Freud calls a 'sort of inner dishonesty'. As for the artist, he is virtually in the same category with the neurotic. 'By such separation of imagination and intellectual capacity', Freud says of the hero of a novel, 'he is destined to be a poet or a neurotic, and he belongs to that race of beings whose realm is not of this world.'

Now there is no in the logic of psycho-analytical thought which requires Freud to have these opinions. But there is a great deal in the practice of the psycho-analytical therapy which makes it understandable that Freud, unprotected by an adequate philosophy, should be tempted to take that he does. The analytical therapy deals with illusion. The patient comes to the physician. To be cured, let us say, of a fear of walking in the street. The fear is real enough, there is no illusion on that score, and it produces all the physical symptoms of a more rational fear, the sweating palms, pounding heart and shortened breath. But the patient knows that there is no cause for the fear-or, rather, that there is, as he says, no 'real cause': there are no machine-guns, man-traps or tigers in the street. The physician knows, however, that there is indeed a 'real' cause for the fear, though it has nothing at all to do with what is or is not in the street; the cause is within the patient, and the process of the therapy will be to discover, by gradual steps, what this real cause is and so free the patient from its effects.

Now the patient, in coming to the physician, and the physician in accepting the patient, make a tacit compact about reality; for their purpose they agree to the limited reality by which we get our living, win our loves, catch our trains and our colds. The therapy will undertake to train the patient in proper ways of coping with this reality. The patient, of course, has been dealing with this reality all along, but in the wrong way. For Freud there are two ways of dealing with external reality. One is practical, effective, positive ; this is the way of the conscious self, of the ego which must be made independent of the super-ego and extend its organization over the id, and it is the right way. The antithetical way may be called, for our purpose now, the 'fictional' way. Instead of doing something about, or to, external reality, the individual who uses this way does something to, or about, his affective states. The most common and 'normal' example of this is day-dreaming in which we give ourselves a certain pleasure by imagining our difficulties solved or our desires gratified. Then, too, as Freud discovered, sleeping dreams are, in much more complicated ways, and even though quite unpleasant, at the service of this same 'fictional' activity. And in ways yet more complicated and yet more unpleasant, the actual neurosis-from which our patient suffers-deals with an external reality which the mind considers still more unpleasant than the painful neurosis itself. For Freud as psycho-analytic practitioner there are, we may say, the polar extremes of reality and illusion. Reality is an honorific word, and it means what is there; Illusion is a pejorative word, and it means a response to what is not there. The didactic nature of a course of psycho-analysis no doubt requires a certain firm crudeness in malign the distinction; it is, after all, aimed not at theoretical refinement but at practical effectiveness. The polar extremes are practical reality and neurotic illusion, the latter judged by the former. This, no doubt, is as it should be; the patient is not being trained in metaphysics and epistemology.

## 12.2 Plot and Major Characters

Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories is comprised of five stories, all of which had been published previously in periodicals. "Impediments," originally published in Menorah Journal in 1925, is the account of an uncomfortable encounter between two university students. "The Other



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Margaret," which initially appeared in the Partisan Review in 1945, concerns an urbane, wealthy New York family and their African American maid, Margaret. In the story, the family's liberal ideas are challenged when Margaret proves to be a destructive, troubled young woman. When the daughter of the family, also named Margaret, tries to excuse the maid's mean-spirited behavior, the patriarch of the family realizes that despite her troubles, the maid is not excused from individual responsibility and societal obligations. "Notes on a Departure," the third story in *Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories*, was originally published in the *Menorah Journal* in 1929. It chronicles the final days of a university professor on campus, as he prepares to leave his job for good. He reflects on his tendency to separate himself from his colleagues, the town, and the university in general. In "The Lesson and the Secret," which initially appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1945, Trilling explores the dynamics of a creative writing class frequented by older, society ladies who clash with their young male instructor. In the best-known story of the collection, "Of This Time, Of That Place," which was published in the *Partisan Review* in 1943, Trilling once again returns to an academic setting to chronicle the relationship between an English instructor and poet, Joseph Howe, and two of his students: Tertan, a brilliant, but mentally ill student of philosophy and art; and Blackburn, a wily and unprincipled opportunist. Howe's eventual betrayal of Tertan's and Blackburn's professional successes leads Howe to reevaluate his own value system.

### 12.3 Major Themes

In several of his stories, Trilling strived to strip away the veneer of civility in societal interactions to expose inner lives of emotional strife, hidden motives, scruples, and self-discovery. As Trilling stated, fiction should "raise questions in our minds not only about the conditions but about ourselves, lead us to refine our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses." Along with a ruthless examination of morality, he often addressed the limits of liberal ideology in his stories—several characters reject liberal values in favor of more conservative concepts of materialism, opportunism, and individual responsibility. Reviewers note that several of the stories in *Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories* concern maturation and explore the relationship between art and life as well as science and morality.

### 12.4 Critical Appreciation

Trilling is considered a renowned literary critic, and critics speculate that his reputation as a critic has overshadowed his fictional work, which includes *Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories*. Commentators note that the stories in the volume embody themes that occupy a prominent place in his critical work. Several of the stories are viewed as autobiographical in nature. Critics have speculated as to the origins of the characters in the stories, particularly "Of This Time, Of That Place." The stories have been derided as being too literary and old-fashioned to attract much new critical attention. Yet reviewers praise them as erudite and complex tales befitting a critic of great reputation, and they urge greater critical and popular attention to *Of This Time, Of That Place*.

#### **Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Partisan review appeared in ..... .
  - (a) 1945
  - (b) 1942
  - (c) 1950
  - (d) None of these
- (ii) The photagonist in this essay is ..... .
  - (a) Rameau
  - (b) Diderot
  - (c) Meister
  - (d) None of these

- (iii) Trilling's biography of Arnold appeared in ..... .
- (a) 1938 (b) 1935  
(c) 1939 (d) 1940
- (iv) Freud was greeted as the ..... .
- (a) Inventor of the greats (b) Discoverer of the unconscious  
(c) Founded of psycho-analysis (d) None of these

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## 12.5 Summary

- In 1940 Lionel Trilling in his "Freud and Literature" remarked that "of all mental systems the Freudian psychology is the one which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind." This quote clearly proves that Trilling had a very high regard for Freud. Trilling believed that Freud's pioneering method of psychoanalysis combines the preciseness of the scientific method with the imaginative insights of the romantic notion of the mystery that is the human mind to understand and appreciate literary works. Trilling asserted that Freud revealed through psychoanalysis that a creative writer was not a neurotic but a disciplined literary artist who was capable of creating memorable fantasies.
- WE now know, from parts of his diaries, posthumously published, that Trilling hoped to be thought of primarily as a novelist rather than a literary critic. An editor at The New Yorker once showed him a letter Hemingway had sent in 1933, to which Trilling's response was passionately confessional.
- A crazy letter written when he was drunk -- self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd: yet Trilling's next three major books were collections of essays, often critical introductions to new editions of famous books. In these -- *The Liberal Imagination*, *The Opposing Self* (1955), and *Beyond Culture* (1965) -- we find the unique character of his treatment of particular novels. Whether he was dealing with Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Dickens's *Little Dorrit* or Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or Henry James's *The Bostonians* or Jane Austen's *Emma*, Trilling always moved from plot and character and style to larger ideas about morality or psychology. Even more appealing than this compulsion to explore the wider implications of a work is the sheer passion with which he responded to it. Morris Dickstein's foreword -- the most thorough, personal, and balanced essay in *Trilling and the Critics* describes Trilling's approach to literature vividly.
- What meant most to him was to be possessed by a book, to be disoriented and changed by it.... Trilling talked about books as if they might rise up and attack him; he was especially fond of quoting Auden's remark that books read us as much as we read them.
- Even more colorful is Irving Howe's inventive image. Trilling would circle a work with his fond, nervous wariness, as if in the presence of some force, some living energy, which could not always be kept under proper control -- indeed, as if he were approaching an elemental power.
- Several critics choose Trilling's introduction to *The Selected Letters of John Keats* as his most brilliant, most original portrait (included in *The Opposing Self*). The introduction was called "The Poet as Hero," and it responded to the person revealed by the letters in a way that can best be described as intellectual hero worship.
- The charm of Keats's letters is inexhaustible.... [His] wisdom is the proud, bitter, and joyful acceptance of tragic life which we associate pre-eminently with Shakespeare.... [Despite his] mature masculinity ... he had an awareness, rare in our culture, of the female principle as a power, an energy.... He with his intense naturalism that took so passionate an account of the mystery of man's nature, reckoning as boldly with pleasure as with pain.
- This is not the tone or savor of most literary criticism. Trilling wrote with similar though not equal ardor about Jane Austen and Henry James and Charles Dickens. Even if we find his language excessive, he nevertheless engages us and compels our attention. It is this heightened

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emotional and intellectual force, contained behind a serene and genial manner, that explains Trilling's popularity with students and his remarkable influence, through generations of students and readers, in the English departments of universities across the country and, to a lesser degree, in England.

- I have no room to discuss Trilling's deep involvement with the writings of Sigmund Freud, whom he admired enormously for his forceful recognition of the dark side of life and for his courage in discovering and telling unpalatable truths. However, the essay included here by the psychotherapist Bruno Bettelheim offers a superb account of the interaction of Trilling, psychoanalysis, and literature. Nor do I have room to explore Trilling's ambivalent feelings about teaching the great modern writers -- D. H. Lawrence and Franz Kafka, Yeats and Eliot, Joyce and Proust, Mann and Conrad -- all of whom he believed offered an adversarial, indeed a subversive, attitude toward the basic tenets of liberal democracy. Trilling asked his students to look into the abyss of terrors and mysteries gaping before them in this literature and found them passively interested, displaying neither wonder nor fear. Was the effect of teaching such works, under the respectable auspices of a university course, simply to legitimize and define the subversive?

### 12.6 Key-Words

1. Lack : Lack is located in the fact of desire being founded on a primordial absence yet being committed to a necessarily futile quest for what is lacking.
2. Desire : Desire is the gap between the demand for love and the appetite for satisfaction.

### 12.7 Review Questions

1. What is the relationship between Freud and literature according to Trilling?
2. What is Lionel Trilling trying to say when he states. It is new life and not art that requires the willing suspension of disbelief.
3. Explain Psychoanalysis theories of Freud.
4. Discuss the role of Ramean in Trilling's essay.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (a)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (b)

### 12.8 Further Readings



Books

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## Unit 13: The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious – Jacques Lacan: An Introduction

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Lacan.
- Discuss Biography and His Works.

### Introduction

Jacques Marie Émile Lacan was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made prominent contributions to psychoanalysis and philosophy, and has been called "the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud". Giving yearly seminars in Paris from 1953 to 1981, Lacan influenced France's intellectuals in the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the post-structuralist philosophers. His interdisciplinary work was as a "self-proclaimed Freudian..." "It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian"; and featured the unconscious, the castration complex, the ego, identification, and language as subjective perception. His ideas have had a significant impact on critical theory, literary theory, 20th-century French philosophy, sociology, feminist theory, film theory and clinical psychoanalysis.

### 13.1 Biography

#### **Early life**

Lacan was born in Paris, the eldest of Emilie and Alfred Lacan's three children. His father was a successful soap and oils salesman. His mother was ardently Catholic-his younger brother went to a monastery in 1929 and Lacan attended the Jesuit Collège Stanislas. During the early 1920s, Lacan attended right-wing Action Française political meetings and met the founder, Charles Maurras. By the mid-1920s, Lacan had become dissatisfied with religion and quarrelled with his family over it.

A growing psychoanalytical movement in France had been showing a particular interest in similar patients. Lacan wrote his thesis for his doctorat d'état in 1932 titled *De la psychose paranoïaque*

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dans ses rapports avec la personnalité, in which he drew a connection between psychiatric medicine and psychoanalysis. It was this combination of the theoretical and the clinical that would become Lacan's practice and inform what he would call his "return to Freud." In his lifetime, Lacan extended the field of psychoanalysis into philosophy, linguistics, literature and mathematics, through close readings of Freud and continued clinical practice.



*Did u know?* Lacan was an admirable student, and excelled especially at Latin and philosophy. He went to medical school, and began studying psychoanalysis in the 1920s with the psychiatrist Gaïtan de Clérambault. He studied at the Faculté de Médecine de Paris, and worked with patients suffering from *délires ý deux*, or "automatism," a condition in which the patient believes his actions, writing, or speech, are controlled by an outside and omnipotent force.

In discussions of Lacan's career, it is often divided into four stages. The first, from 1926 to 1953, marks an evolution from conventional psychiatric work to the gradual inclusion of psychoanalytical concepts in the clinic, both in diagnosis and treatment. His first publications are case studies. In 1936 Lacan developed his theory of the "Mirror Stage", and published a number of articles about its importance in the development of the subject. This work was particularly influenced by the psychologist Henri Wallon, as well as J.M. Baldwin, Charlotte Bühler, and Otto Rank. The Mirror Stage concerns the ability of an infant (6 to 18 months of age) to recognize its own image in mirror, before it is able to speak or have control over its motor skills. The infant must see the image of itself as both being itself and not itself, in that it is the reflection of its own face and only a reflected image at the same time. To become a subject, or social being, the infant must come to terms with the reflection not being identical to itself as a subject. This marks the child's entry into language, and the formation of ego. The Mirror Stage changes the emphasis in subject formation from a biological base to a symbolic or language base. As Lacan writes in the Discourse of Rome, "Man speaks...but it is because the symbol has made him man."

The Discourse of Rome is the more common name given to Lacan's lecture presented in Rome in 1953 originally titled *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse*. This paper became the manifesto of the new Société française de psychanalytique (SFP), which Lacan formed the same year when he broke with the International Psycho-Analytical Association (IPA). His break with the IPA was based on major disagreements Lacan had with the ego psychology of the group, which placed the ego at the origin of psychic stability. Lacan argued against therapeutic pretensions, claiming that the ego could never be "healed", and that the true intension of psychoanalysis was never cure, but analysis itself.

Lacan attracted philosophers, linguists, and other thinkers to his renowned weekly seminar at St. Anne's Church. Barthes, Foucault, Levi-Strauss, and Althusser sat in his audience and were influenced by his work. From this lecture series came what is perhaps his most celebrated work, *Écrits* (1966).

From 1953-63 Lacan concentrated on structural linguistics and the role of the symbolic in the work of Freud. He felt that Freud had understood that human psychology is linguistically based, but would have needed Saussure's vocabulary and structuralist concept of language as a system of differences to articulate the relationship. In *Les Psychoses: Seminar III*, Lacan claims that the unconscious is "structured like a language," and governed by the order of the signifier. This is contrary to the idea that the unconscious is governed by autonomous repressed or instinctual desires. Saussure's linguistic theory, especially on the relation of constant separation between signifier and signified, led Lacan to show that no signifier ever rests on any particular signified. He went on to argue that the Symbolic order, the order of signs, representations, significations and images, is the place where the individual is formed as a subject. He stated that the subject is always the subject of the signifier.



"I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming." (From *Écrits*)

Lacan translated Martin Heidegger's work into French and the evidence of Heidegger's influence can be read in Lacan's essay *The Function and Field of Speech in Psychoanalysis*, in which he concentrates on the idea that subjectivity is symbolically constituted. Lacan was also influenced by Hegel's work, and by his discussions with both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. He was the first to introduce structural linguistics to psychoanalytical theory, and because of this he attracted attention both nationally and, later in the 1970s, internationally. He was considered unorthodox and unusual in his psychoanalytical practice, and his lectures were a form of practice alongside his work as an analyst, in that they put his theory into practical form. His lectures made his theory evident: that language can say something other than what it says, and that it speaks through humans as much as they speak it.

Language is of the Symbolic order, one of three orders that constitute the subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the other two being the Imaginary and the Real. The Imaginary is the place where the subject fails to see the lack of reality in the symbolic, and mis-recognizes its nature, believing in its transparency. The Imaginary is the place of necessary illusion. At the level of the Imaginary, the de-centering of the subject that occurs at the Mirror Phase is not acknowledged. The Real can be understood, in one sense, as that that is always "in its place," because only what is absent from its place can be symbolized. The Symbolic is the substitute for what is missing from its place; language cannot be in the same place as its referent.

In the years 1964-73 Lacan departed further still from Freud and traditional psychoanalysis. His discourse became uniquely "Lacanian", and he became known for his neologisms and complex diagrams. His view of the ego as the seat of neurosis rather than the place of psychic integration, and the Symbolic order as the primary place for subject formation, made his work groundbreaking. He still claimed to be continuing Freud's work, which had only been obscured by Freud's followers, and this accusation caused tension within the SFP. Lacan left this group in 1963 to form the *École Freudienne de Paris* (EFP). The decision to start the new group was inspired by a series of lectures, given at the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, in which he read Freud's texts closely but also introduced new terms to the readings from outside the original work.



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In 1920, on being rejected as too thin for military service, he entered medical school and, in 1926, specialised in psychiatry at the Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris. He was especially interested in the philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger and attended the seminars about Hegel given by Alexandre Kojève. Sometime in that decade, and until 1938, Lacan sought psychoanalysis by Rudolph Loewenstein. The analysis was lengthy and perhaps not wholly successful: "Loewenstein... often expressed his opinion orally to the people around him: the man was unanalyzable. And Lacan was unanalyzable in those conditions".

These lectures attracted still more attention from outside the psychoanalytical circle, including the press, who associated Lacan with the "structuralists" practicing in France at the same time. The training methods of Lacan's new school, the EFP, departed considerably from the traditional training offered to analysts at the IPA, causing the IPA distress. Tension between Lacan and the traditional psychoanalytic community grew greater still when he took the position of "Scientific Director" at the University of Paris at Vincennes in 1974, heading the department of psychoanalysis which had opened in 1969. Lacan hoped the new department at the University would integrate linguistics, logic and mathematics with psychoanalytical training, giving it a scientific rigor.

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Lacan strived to create a more precise mathematically based theory in the last stage of his career. His "meta-theory" of psychoanalysis uses mathematics, casting the trilogy he conceived of earlier (the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary) in the language of topology and mathemes rather than linguistics. He claimed that "La mathématisation seule atteint ý un reel." From 1974 he studied the intersection of the three registers through complicated topological figures. He began to confound even his most faithful followers, and students became suspicious of how applicable this type of education might be to their clinical practice. Lacan decided to dissolve the EFP and found another association, the École de la Cause Freudienne, which he maintained until his death in 1981. By the time of his death, Lacan had become one of the most influential and controversial intellects in the world. His work has had a significant effect on literature, film studies, and philosophy, as well as on the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.



*Did u know?* In 1931, Lacan became a licensed forensic psychiatrist. In 1932, he was awarded the Doctorat d'état for his thesis On Paranoiac Psychosis in its Relations to the meetings and met the founder, Charles Maurras. By the mid-1920s, Lacan had become dissatisfied with religion and quarrelled with his family over it.

### 13.2 Lacan's Major Concepts

Lacan's "return to Freud" emphasizes a renewed attention to the original texts of Freud, and included a radical critique of Ego psychology, whereas "Lacan's quarrel with Object Relations psychoanalysis" was a more muted affair. Here he attempted "to restore to the notion of the Object Relation... the capital of experience that legitimately belongs to it", building upon what he termed "the hesitant, but controlled work of Melanie Klein... Through her we know the function of the imaginary primordial enclosure formed by the imago of the mother's body", as well as upon "the notion of the transitional object, introduced by D. W. Winnicott... a key-point for the explanation of the genesis of fetishism". Nevertheless, "Lacan systematically questioned those psychoanalytic developments from the 1930s to the 1970s, which were increasingly and almost exclusively focused on the child's early relations with the mother... the pre-Oedipal or Kleinian mother"; and Lacan's rereading of Freud-"characteristically, Lacan insists that his return to Freud supplies the only valid model"-formed a basic conceptual starting-point in that oppositional strategy.

Lacan thought that Freud's ideas of "slips of the tongue," jokes, and the interpretation of dreams all emphasized the agency of language in subjective constitution. In "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," he proposes that "the unconscious is structured like a language." The unconscious is not a primitive or archetypal part of the mind separate from the conscious, linguistic ego, he explained, but rather a formation as complex and structurally sophisticated as consciousness itself. One consequence of the unconscious being structured like a language is that the self is denied any point of reference to which to be "restored" following trauma or a crisis of identity.

Andre Green objected that "when you read Freud, it is obvious that this proposition doesn't work for a minute. Freud very clearly opposes the unconscious (which he says is constituted by thing-presentations and nothing else) to the pre-conscious. What is related to language can only belong to the pre-conscious". Freud certainly contrasted "the presentation of the word and the presentation of the thing... the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone" in his metapsychology. However "Dylan Evans, Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis... takes issue with those who, like Andre Green, question the linguistic aspect of the unconscious, emphasizing Lacan's distinction between das Ding and die Sache in Freud's account of thing-presentation". Green's criticism of Lacan also included accusations of intellectual dishonesty, he said, "" [He] cheated everybody... the return to Freud was an excuse, it just meant going to Lacan."

## Mirror Stage

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Lacan's first official contribution to psychoanalysis was the mirror stage, which he described as "formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience." By the early 1950s, he came to regard the mirror stage as more than a moment in the life of the infant; instead, it formed part of the permanent structure of subjectivity. In "the Imaginary order," their own image permanently catches and captivates the subject. Lacan explains that "the mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image".

As this concept developed further, the stress fell less on its historical value and more on its structural value. In his fourth Seminar, "La relation d'objet," Lacan states that "the mirror stage is far from a mere phenomenon which occurs in the development of the child. It illustrates the conflictual nature of the dual relationship."

The mirror stage describes the formation of the Ego via the process of objectification, the Ego being the result of a conflict between one's perceived visual appearance and one's emotional experience. This identification is what Lacan called alienation. At six months, the baby still lacks physical co-ordination. The child is able to recognize themselves in a mirror prior to the attainment of control over their bodily movements. The child sees their image as a whole and the synthesis of this image produces a sense of contrast with the lack of co-ordination of the body, which is perceived as a fragmented body. The child experiences this contrast initially as a rivalry with their image, because the wholeness of the image threatens the child with fragmentation—thus the mirror stage gives rise to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image. To resolve this aggressive tension, the child identifies with the image: this primary identification with the counterpart forms the Ego. Lacan understands this moment of identification as a moment of jubilation, since it leads to an imaginary sense of mastery; yet when the child compares their own precarious sense of mastery with the omnipotence of the mother, a depressive reaction may accompany the jubilation.

Lacan calls the specular image "orthopaedic," since it leads the child to anticipate the overcoming of its "real specific prematurity of birth." The vision of the body as integrated and contained, in opposition to the child's actual experience of motor incapacity and the sense of his or her body as fragmented, induces a movement from "insufficiency to anticipation." In other words, the mirror image initiates and then aids, like a crutch, the process of the formation of an integrated sense of self.

In the mirror stage a "misunderstanding" (méconnaissance) constitutes the Ego—the "me" (moi) becomes alienated from itself through the introduction of an imaginary dimension to the subject. The mirror stage also has a significant symbolic dimension, due to the presence of the figure of the adult who carries the infant. Having jubilantly assumed the image as their own, the child turns their head towards this adult, who represents the big Other, as if to call on the adult to ratify this image.

## Other/Otherness

While Freud uses the term "other", referring to *der Andere* (the other person) and "das Andere" (otherness), under the influence of Alexandre Kojève, Lacan's use is closer to Hegel's.

Lacan often used an algebraic symbology for his concepts: the big Other is designated A (for French *Autre*) and the little other is designated a (italicized French *autre*). He asserts that an awareness of this distinction is fundamental to analytic practice: "the analyst must be imbued with the difference between A and a, so he can situate himself in the place of Other, and not the other." Dylan Evans explains that:

1. The little other is the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of the Ego. He [autre] is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image. The little other is thus entirely inscribed in the imaginary order.
2. The big Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this

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radical alterity with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the order of the symbolic. Indeed, the big Other is the symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject. The Other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject."

"The Other must first of all be considered a locus," Lacan writes, "the locus in which speech is constituted". We can speak of the Other as a subject in a secondary sense only when a subject occupies this position and thereby embodies the Other for another subject.

In arguing that speech originates not in the Ego nor in the subject but rather in the Other, Lacan stresses that speech and language are beyond the subject's conscious control. They come from another place, outside of consciousness-"the unconscious is the discourse of the Other." When conceiving the Other as a place, Lacan refers to Freud's concept of psychical locality, in which the unconscious is described as "the other scene".

"It is the mother who first occupies the position of the big Other for the child," Dylan Evans explains, "it is she who receives the child's primitive cries and retroactively sanctions them as a particular message". The castration complex is formed when the child discovers that this Other is not complete because there is a "Lack (manque)" in the Other. This means that there is always a signifier missing from the trove of signifiers constituted by the Other. Lacan illustrates this incomplete Other graphically by striking a bar through the symbol A; hence another name for the castrated, incomplete Other is the "barred Other."

Feminist thinkers have both utilised and criticised Lacan's concepts of castration and the Phallus. Some feminists have argued that Lacan's phallogocentric analysis provides a useful means of understanding gender biases and imposed roles, while other feminist critics, most notably Luce Irigaray, accuse Lacan of maintaining the sexist tradition in psychoanalysis. For Irigaray, the Phallus does not define a single axis of gender by its presence/absence; instead, gender has two positive poles. Like Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, in criticizing Lacan's concept of castration, discusses the phallus in a chiasmus with the hymen, as both one and other. Other feminists, such as Judith Butler, Jane Gallop, and Elizabeth Grosz, have interpreted Lacan's work as opening up new possibilities for feminist theory.

### **13.3 The Three Orders**

#### **The Imaginary**

The Imaginary is the field of images and imagination, and deception. The main illusions of this order are synthesis, autonomy, duality, and similarity. Lacan thought that the relationship created within the mirror stage between the Ego and the reflected image means that the Ego and the Imaginary order itself are places of radical alienation: "alienation is constitutive of the Imaginary order." This relationship is also narcissistic.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues that the Symbolic order structures the visual field of the Imaginary, which means that it involves a linguistic dimension. If the signifier is the foundation of the Symbolic, the signified and signification are part of the Imaginary order. Language has Symbolic and Imaginary connotations-in its Imaginary aspect, language is the "wall of language" that inverts and distorts the discourse of the Other. On the other hand, the Imaginary is rooted in the subject's relationship with his or her own body (the image of the body). In *Fetishism: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real*, Lacan argues that in the sexual plane the Imaginary appears as sexual display and courtship love.

Insofar as identification with the analyst is the objective of analysis, Lacan accused major psychoanalytic schools of reducing the practice of psychoanalysis to the Imaginary order. Instead, Lacan proposes the use of the Symbolic to dislodge the disabling fixations of the Imaginary-the analyst transforms the images into words. "The use of the Symbolic," he argued, "is the only way for the analytic process to cross the plane of identification."

## The Symbolic

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In his Seminar IV, "La relation d'objet," Lacan argues that the concepts of "Law" and "Structure" are unthinkable without language—thus the Symbolic is a linguistic dimension. This order is not equivalent to language, however, since language involves the Imaginary and the Real as well. The dimension proper to language in the Symbolic is that of the signifier—that is, a dimension in which elements have no positive existence, but which are constituted by virtue of their mutual differences.

The Symbolic is also the field of radical alterity—that is, the Other; the unconscious is the discourse of this Other. It is the realm of the Law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex. The Symbolic is the domain of culture as opposed to the Imaginary order of nature. As important elements in the Symbolic, the concepts of death and lack (*manque*) connive to make of the pleasure principle the regulator of the distance from the Thing ("das Ding an sich") and the death drive that goes "beyond the pleasure principle by means of repetition"—"the death drive is only a mask of the Symbolic order."

By working in the Symbolic order, the analyst is able to produce changes in the subjective position of the analysand. These changes will produce imaginary effects because the Imaginary is structured by the Symbolic.

## The Real

Lacan's concept of the Real dates back to 1936 and his doctoral thesis on psychosis. It was a term that was popular at the time, particularly with Émile Meyerson, who referred to it as "an ontological absolute, a true being-in-itself". Lacan returned to the theme of the Real in 1953 and continued to develop it until his death. The Real, for Lacan, is not synonymous with reality. Not only opposed to the Imaginary, the Real is also exterior to the Symbolic. Unlike the latter, which is constituted in terms of oppositions (i.e. presence/absence), "there is no absence in the Real." Whereas the Symbolic opposition "presence/absence" implies the possibility that something may be missing from the Symbolic, "the Real is always in its place." If the Symbolic is a set of differentiated elements (signifiers), the Real in itself is undifferentiated—it bears no fissure. The Symbolic introduces "a cut in the real" in the process of signification: "it is the world of words that creates the world of things—things originally confused in the "here and now" of the all in the process of coming into being." The Real is that which is outside language and that resists symbolization absolutely. In Seminar XI Lacan defines the Real as "the impossible" because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the Symbolic, and impossible to attain. It is this resistance to symbolization that lends the Real its traumatic quality. Finally, the Real is the object of anxiety, insofar as it lacks any possible mediation and is "the essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence."

## Conception of Desire

Lacan's conception of desire is central to his theories and follows Freud's concept of *Wunsch*. The aim of psychoanalysis is to lead the analysand and to uncover the truth about his or her desire, but this is possible only if that desire is articulated. Lacan wrote that "it is only once it is formulated, named in the presence of the other, that desire appears in the full sense of the term." This naming of desire "is not a question of recognizing something which would be entirely given. In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world." Psychoanalysis teaches the patient "to bring desire into existence." The truth about desire is somehow present in discourse, although discourse is never able to articulate the entire truth about desire—whenever discourse attempts to articulate desire, there is always a leftover or surplus.

In "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan distinguishes desire from need and demand. Need is a biological instinct that is articulated in demand, yet demand has a double function: on the one hand, it articulates need, and on the other, acts as a demand for love. Even after the need articulated in demand is satisfied, the demand for love remains unsatisfied. This remainder is desire. For Lacan, "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second." Lacan adds that "desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need." Hence desire can never



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be satisfied, or as Slavoj Žižek puts it, "desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire."

It is also important to distinguish between desire and the drives. The drives are the partial manifestations of a single force called desire. Lacan's concept of the "objet petit a" is the object of desire, although this object is not that towards which desire tends, but rather the cause of desire. Desire is not a relation to an object but a relation to a lack (*manque*).

### Drives

Lacan maintains Freud's distinction between drive (*Trieb*) and instinct (*Instinkt*). Drives differ from biological needs because they can never be satisfied and do not aim at an object but rather circle perpetually around it. The true source of *jouissance* is the repetition of the movement of this closed circuit. Lacan posits the drives as both cultural and symbolic constructs—to him, "the drive is not a given, something archaic, primordial." He incorporates the four elements of the drives as defined by Freud (the pressure, the end, the object and the source) to his theory of the drive's circuit: the drive originates in the erogenous zone, circles round the object, and returns to the erogenous zone. The three grammatical voices structure this circuit:

1. the active voice (to see)
2. the reflexive voice (to see oneself)
3. the passive voice (to be seen)

The active and reflexive voices are autoerotic—they lack a subject. It is only when the drive completes its circuit with the passive voice that a new subject appears. Despite being the "passive" voice, the drive is essentially active: "to make oneself be seen" rather than "to be seen." The circuit of the drive is the only way for the subject to transgress the pleasure principle.

Lacan identifies four partial drives: the oral drive (the erogenous zones are the lips, the partial object the breast), the anal drive (the anus and the faeces), the scopic drive (the eyes and the gaze) and the invocatory drive (the ears and the voice). The first two relate to demand and the last two to desire. If the drives are closely related to desire, they are the partial aspects in which desire is realized—desire is one and undivided, whereas the drives are its partial manifestations.

### Other Concepts

Les Non-dupes errent": Lacan on error and knowledge

Building on Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Lacan long argued that "every unsuccessful act is a successful, not to say 'well-turned', discourse", highlighting as well "sudden transformations of errors into truths, which seemed to be due to nothing more than perseverance". In a late seminar, he generalised more fully the psychoanalytic discovery of "truth-arising from misunderstanding", so as to maintain that "the subject is naturally erring... discourse structures alone give him his moorings and reference points, signs identify and orient him; if he neglects, forgets, or loses them, he is condemned to err anew".

Because of "the alienation to which speaking beings are subjected due to their being in language", to survive "one must let oneself be taken in by signs and become the dupe of a discourse... [of] fictions organized in to a discourse". For Lacan, with "masculine knowledge irredeemably an erring", the individual "must thus allow himself to be fooled by these signs to have a chance of getting his bearings amidst them; he must place and maintain himself in the wake of a discourse... become the dupe of a discourse... les Non-dupes errent".

Lacan comes close here to one of the points where "very occasionally he sounds like Thomas Kuhn (whom he never mentions)", with Lacan's "discourse" resembling Kuhn's "paradigm" seen as "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community"—something reinforced perhaps by Kuhn's approval of "Francis Bacon's acute methodological dictum: 'Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion'".



## 13.4 Clinical Contributions

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### Variable-length Session

The "variable-length psychoanalytic session" was one of Lacan's crucial clinical innovations, and a key element in his conflicts with the IPA, to whom his "innovation of reducing the fifty-minute analytic hour to a Delphic seven or eight minutes (or sometimes even to a single oracular parole murmured in the waiting-room)" was unacceptable. Lacan's variable-length sessions lasted anywhere from a few minutes (or even, if deemed appropriate by the analyst, a few seconds) to several hours. This practice replaced the classical Freudian "fifty minute hour".

With respect to what he called "the cutting up of the 'timing'", Lacan asked the question, "Why make an intervention impossible at this point, which is consequently privileged in this way?" By allowing the analyst's intervention on timing, the variable-length session removed the patient's—or, technically, "the analysand's"—former certainty as to the length of time that they would be on the couch. When Lacan adopted the practice, "the psychoanalytic establishment were scandalized"—and, given that "between 1979 and 1980 he saw an average of ten patients an hour", it is perhaps not hard to see why: "psychoanalysis reduced to zero", if no less lucrative.

At the time of his original innovation, Lacan described the issue as concerning "the systematic use of shorter sessions in certain analyses, and in particular in training analyses"; and in practice it was certainly a shortening of the session around the so-called "critical moment" which took place, so that critics wrote that 'everyone is well aware what is meant by the deceptive phrase "variable length"... sessions systematically reduced to just a few minutes'. Irrespective of the theoretical merits of breaking up patients' expectations, it was clear that "the Lacanian analyst never wants to 'shake up' the routine by keeping them for more rather than less time".

"Whatever the justification, the practical effects were startling. It does not take a cynic to point out that Lacan was able to take on many more analysands than anyone using classical Freudian techniques... [and] as the technique was adopted by his pupils and followers an almost exponential rate of growth became possible".

Accepting the importance of "the critical moment when insight arises", object relations theory would nonetheless quietly suggest that "if the analyst does not provide the patient with space in which nothing needs to happen there is no space in which something can happen". Julia Kristeva, if in very different language, would concur that "Lacan, alert to the scandal of the timeless intrinsic to the analytic experience, was mistaken in wanting to ritualize it as a technique of scansion (short sessions)".

### 13.5 Writings and Writing Style

Jacques-Alain Miller is the sole editor of Lacan's seminars, which contain the majority of his life's work. "There has been considerable controversy over the accuracy or otherwise of the transcription and editing", as well as over "Miller's refusal to allow any critical or annotated edition to be published". Despite Lacan's status as a major figure in the history of psychoanalysis, some of his seminars remain unpublished. Since 1984, Miller has been regularly conducting a series of lectures, "L'orientation lacanienne." Miller's teachings have been published in the US by the journal Lacanian Ink.

Lacan claimed that his *Écrits* were not to be understood rationally, but would rather produce an effect in the reader similar to the sense of enlightenment one might experience while reading mystical texts. Lacan's writing is notoriously difficult, due in part to the repeated Hegelian/Kojèvean allusions, wide theoretical divergences from other psychoanalytic and philosophical theory, and an obscure prose style. For some, "the impenetrability of Lacan's prose... [is] too often regarded as profundity precisely because it cannot be understood". Arguably at least, "the imitation of his style by other 'Lacanian' commentators" has resulted in "an obscurantist antisystematic tradition in Lacanian literature".

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The broader psychotherapeutic literature has little or nothing to say about the effectiveness of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Though a major influence on psychoanalysis in France and parts of Latin America, Lacan's influence on clinical psychology in the English-speaking world is negligible, where his ideas are best known in the arts and humanities.

A notable exception is the works of Dr. Annie G. Rogers (*A Shining Affliction; The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma*), which credit Lacanian theory for many therapeutic insights in successfully treating sexually abused young women.

### 13.6 His Criticisms

Alan D. Sokal and Jean Bricmont in their book *Fashionable Nonsense* have criticised Lacan's use of terms from mathematical fields such as topology, accusing him of "superficial erudition" and of abusing scientific concepts that he does not understand. Other critics have dismissed Lacan's work wholesale. François Roustang called it an "incoherent system of pseudo-scientific gibberish," and quoted linguist Noam Chomsky's opinion that Lacan was an "amusing and perfectly self-conscious charlatan". Dylan Evans, formerly a Lacanian analyst, eventually dismissed Lacanianism as lacking a sound scientific basis and for harming rather than helping patients, and has criticized Lacan's followers for treating his writings as "holy writ." Richard Webster has decried what he sees as Lacan's obscurity, arrogance, and the resultant "Cult of Lacan". Richard Dawkins, in a review of *Fashionable Nonsense*, said regarding Lacan: "We do not need the mathematical expertise of Sokal and Bricmont to assure us that the author of this stuff is a fake. Perhaps he is genuine when he speaks of non-scientific subjects? But a philosopher who is caught equating the erectile organ to the square root of minus one has, for my money, blown his credentials when it comes to things that I don't know anything about."

Lacan's colleague Daniel Lagache considered that "[Lacan] embodied the analyst's bad conscience. But... a good conscience in a psychoanalyst is no less dangerous". Others have been more forceful, describing him as "The Shrink from Hell... [an] attractive psychopath", and detailing a long list of collateral damage to "patients, colleagues, mistresses, wives, children, publishers, editors and opponents... [as his] lunatic legacy". Certainly many of "the conflicts around Lacan's school and his person" have been linked to the "form of charismatic authority which, in his personal and institutional presence, he so dramatically provoked". Lacan himself defended his approach on the grounds that "psychosis is an attempt at rigor... I am psychotic for the simple reason that I have always tried to be rigorous".

Malcolm Bowie has suggested that Lacan "had the fatal weakness of all those who are fanatically against all forms of totalization (the complete picture) in the so-called human sciences: a love of system". Similarly, Jacqueline Rose has argued that "Lacan was implicated in the phallicism he described, just as his utterance constantly rejoins the mastery which he sought to undermine". Feminists would then raise the question: "is Lacan, in claiming the law of the father, merely himself in the grip of the Oedipus complex?"

While it is widely recognised that "Lacan was... an intellectual magpie", this was not simply a matter of borrowing from others. Instead, "Lacan was so zealous in invoking other men's work and claiming to base his own arguments on them, when in reality he was departing from their teachings, leaving behind mere skeletons". Even with Freud, it is seldom clearly signposted when Lacan is expounding Freud, when he is reinterpreting Freud, or when he is proposing a completely new theory in Freudian guise. The result was "a complete pattern of dissenting assent to the ideas of Freud... Lacan's argument is conducted on Freud's behalf and, at the same time, against him", [88] so as to leave Lacan himself the "master" of his (and everyone's) thought. "Castoriadis... maintained that Lacan had gradually come to prevent anyone else from thinking because of the way he tried to make all thought dependent on himself".

More personal criticism of his intellectual style is that it depended on a kind of teasing lure- "fundamental truths to be revealed... but always at some further point". In such a (feminist) perspective, "Lacan's sadistic capriciousness reveals the prick behind the Phallus... a narcissistic tease who persuades by means of attraction and resistance, not by orderly systematic discourse".

To intimates like Dolto, "Lacan was like a narcissistic and wayward child... All he thought about was himself and his work". Yet if Lacan was a narcissist, if his writings are essentially "the confessions of a self-justifying megalomaniac", fuelled by "Lacan's craving for recognition-his almost demonic hunger"-if they reveal "a narcissistic enjoyment of mystification as a form of omnipotent power... phantasies of narcissistic omnipotence", yet Lacan was clearly one of "what Maccoby calls 'productive narcissists'... [who] get others to buy into their vision and help to make it a reality... the narcissists who change our world.

## Self-Assessment

### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Lacan was a ..... psychoanalyst.
- |              |                   |
|--------------|-------------------|
| (a) French   | (b) German        |
| (c) American | (d) None of these |
- (ii) Lacan developed the Theory of Mirror in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1930 | (b) 1935 |
| (c) 1936 | (d) 1940 |
- (iii) The Mirror style concerns the ability of ..... .
- |               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| (a) A boy     | (b) A girl |
| (c) An infant | (d) A man  |
- (iv) The discourse of Rome is the more common name given to Lacan's lecture presented in Rome in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1950 | (b) 1953 |
| (c) 1945 | (d) 1960 |

## 13.7 Summary

- Jacques Marie Émile Lacan was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made prominent contributions to psychoanalysis and philosophy, and has been called "the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud".
- Lacan was born in Paris, the eldest of Emilie and Alfred Lacan's three children. His father was a successful soap and oils salesman. His mother was ardently Catholic-his younger brother went to a monastery in 1929 and Lacan attended the Jesuit Collège Stanislas. During the early 1920s, Lacan attended right-wing Action Française political meetings and met the founder, Charles Maurras. By the mid-1920s, Lacan had become dissatisfied with religion and quarrelled with his family over it.
- Lacan was an admirable student, and excelled especially at Latin and philosophy. He went to medical school, and began studying psychoanalysis in the 1920s with the psychiatrist Gaïtan de Clérambault. He studied at the Faculté de Médecine de Paris, and worked with patients suffering from *délires ý deux*, or "automatism," a condition in which the patient believes his actions, writing, or speech, are controlled by an outside and omnipotent force.
- In discussions of Lacan's career, it is often divided into four stages. The first, from 1926 to 1953, marks an evolution from conventional psychiatric work to the gradual inclusion of psychoanalytical concepts in the clinic, both in diagnosis and treatment. His first publications are case studies. In 1936 Lacan developed his theory of the "Mirror Stage", and published a number of articles about its importance in the development of the subject. This work was particularly influenced by the psychologist Henri Wallon, as well as J.M. Baldwin, Charlotte Bühler, and Otto Rank.
- The Discourse of Rome is the more common name given to Lacan's lecture presented in Rome in 1953 originally titled *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse*. This paper became the manifesto of the new Société française de psychanalytique (SFP),

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which Lacan formed the same year when he broke with the International Psycho-Analytical Association (IPA). His break with the IPA was based on major disagreements Lacan had with the ego psychology of the group, which placed the ego at the origin of psychic stability.

- From 1953-63 Lacan concentrated on structural linguistics and the role of the symbolic in the work of Freud. He felt that Freud had understood that human psychology is linguistically based, but would have needed Saussure's vocabulary and structuralist concept of language as a system of differences to articulate the relationship. In *Les Psychoses: Seminar III*, Lacan claims that the unconscious is "structured like a language," and governed by the order of the signifier.
- Lacan translated Martin Heidegger's work into French and the evidence of Heidegger's influence can be read in Lacan's essay *The Function and Field of Speech in Psychoanalysis*, in which he concentrates on the idea that subjectivity is symbolically constituted. Lacan was also influenced by Hegel's work, and by his discussions with both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. He was the first to introduce structural linguistics to psychoanalytical theory, and because of this he attracted attention both nationally and, later in the 1970s, internationally.

## 13.8 Key-Words

1. *Jouissance* : (Fr. 'bliss', 'pleasure', including sexual bliss or orgasm) a term introduced into psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan, to refer to extreme pleasure, but also to that excess whereby pleasure slides into its opposite. Roland Barthes uses the term to suggest an experience of reading as textual bliss. Similarly, Jacques Derrida suggests that the effect of deconstruction is to liberate forbidden *jouissance*.

## 13.9 Review Questions

1. Discuss the biography of Lacan.
2. Write a short note on the life and works of Lacan.
3. What are the three orders of Lacan.
4. Explain Lacan's criticisms.

## Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (b)

## 13.10 Further Readings



### Books

1. Hutcheon, Linda A *poetics of postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, London: Longman, 1972.
4. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh (eds.) *A Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, London: Arnold, 1999.
5. Sethuraman, V.S. and Ramaswamy (eds.) *The English Critical Tradition, Volume II*, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1977.
6. Seturaman, V.S. (ed.) *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008.

## Unit 14: The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious – Jacques Lacan: Detailed Study

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Lacan's ideas.
- Understand The Meaning of the Letter.

### Introduction

The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud is an essay by the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, originally delivered as a talk on May 9, 1957 and later published in Lacan's 1966 book *Écrits*.

Lacan begins the essay by declaring it to be "situated halfway" between speech and writing. By doing so, he foreshadows both the essay's notorious opacity and its theme: the relationship between speech and language and the place of the subject in relation to both. The paper represents a key moment in 'his resolutely structuralist notion of the structure of the subject 'as well as in his gradual 'incorporation of the findings of linguistics and anthropology...in the rise of structuralism'.

### 14.1 The Meaning of the Letter

The essay's first section, 'The Meaning of the Letter', introduces the concept of "the letter", which Lacan describes as 'the material support that concrete discourse borrows from language'. In his commentary on the essay, the Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink argues that "the letter" is best thought of as the differential element which separates two words, noting that:

"In a hundred years, 'drizzle' might be pronounced 'dritszel', but that will be of no importance as long as the place occupied by the consonant in the middle of the word is filled by something that allows us to continue to differentiate the word from other similar words in the English language, such as 'dribble'."

Lacan indicates that the letter, when thought of as a "material medium" in this way, cannot be directly manipulated so as to alter language or intersubjective meaning. In a footnote to the essay, he praises Stalin for rejecting the idea (promoted by some communist philosophers) of creating 'a new language in communist society with the following formulation: language is not a superstructure'.



## 14.2 Lacan's Main Ideas

We stated earlier in the unit that Lacan offered a re-reading of Freud's theories in the light of linguistics. In the 1950s and 1960s he developed a structuralist theory of psychoanalysis based largely on the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The important thing to note in this connection is that Lacan did not import a stable linguistic theory into psychoanalysis. His goal, rather, was that the encounter between Freud and Saussure should lead to a re-thinking of the work of both thinkers in the light of the other person's work.

One of Lacan's famous utterances is that the unconscious is structured like a language. By this he means that the unconscious used linguistic means of self-expression and that the unconscious is an orderly network, as complex as the structure of language. What the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. 'The subject' is seen by Lacan as an effect of language in that its 'position' and identity' is constituted by language. Language mostly names that which is not present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it when the child starts entering the language system.



*Did u know?* Three 'orders' (or cognitive dimensions) are central to Lacan's thought. These are distinctions developed by Lacan to describe the phases in the constitution of the psychic subject.

The first, 'the Imaginary', is the dimension in which there is no clear distinction between subject and object, no central self exists to set the object apart from the subject. The 'Symbolic' order is the realm of language. It sets off the subject on a quest for the unobtainable lost object. The 'Real' is beyond language and abstractly defined in Lacan as a realm or the impossible. All that cannot be represented in the imaginary and the Symbolic belongs here.

In Lacan's scheme of things, our being is founded not on unity but on rupture, the initial experience of being ripped out of a fullness of being and being separated from the object (the mother) that provided us with it. With the initiation of the Symbolic order, the original desire for the mother is repressed. It is like the signified being made absent by the signifier. That is because the signified as Lacan sees it, 'slides' beneath a signifier which 'floats'. Words and meanings have a life of their own and constantly obscure and override the supposed clarity and 'simplicity' of external reality. Language, as an intractable material in its own right, creates by its materiality a barrier between the signifier (the words) and the signified (their referent).

According to Lacan, that which introduces "lack" and "gap" into the operations of the subject is "the other". The subject can only be the unstable effect of meaning, never its master. In its 'otherness', in its exclusion from the imaginary, it is the cause of the lack which initiates desire. 'The other' guarantees the indestructibility of desire by helping to keep the goals of desire in perpetual flight. 'Desire' is that which begins to take shape in the margin in which 'demand' becomes separated from 'need'. In Lacan 'need' is that which can be satisfied by the acquisition of a specific object, and "demand" is that which is addressed to another and seeks reciprocity. Desire involves both 'need' and 'demand' but is not reducible to either. It is directed towards the fantasy constructions that govern the endless search for a satisfactory object in the world, a search that begins with the 'castration complex'. Another thing to note in this context is that 'the phallus', for Lacan, is a signifier of 'lack' – not an actual organ. It stands for 'the law of the father' and the fear of castration. It is experienced as separation and loss in relation to the maternal body.

As Lacan sees the symbolic order, the power of law is above all the power to establish relationship through speech and through the act of naming. The dominant figure of the father is conceived of not as a particular individual, but rather as an abstraction of the paternal role, which is characterized by its privileged possession of the mother and its function as the enforcer of the law. When the male child himself identifies with the father's role, his position is that having been forced to give

up his claim to the mother, he receives in exchange his own claim to a place within the order of language and culture.

### 14.3 Text – The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious

O cities of the sea, I behold in you your citizens, women as well as men tightly bound with stout bonds around their arms and legs by folk who will have no understanding of our speech; and you will only be able to give vent to your griefs and sense of loss of liberty by making tearful complaints, and sighs, and lamentations one to another; for those who bind you will not have understanding of your speech nor will you understand them.

–Leonardo da Vinci

If the nature of this contribution has been set by the theme of this volume of *LaPsychanalyse*, I yet owe to what will be found in it to insert it at a point some-where between the written and spoken word -- it will be halfway between the two.

A written piece is in fact distinguished by a prevalence of the 'text' in the sense which that factor of speech will be seen to take on in this essay, a factor which makes possible the kind of tightening up that I like in order to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult. In that sense, then, this will not be a written work.

The priority I accord to the nourishing of my seminars each time with something new has until now prevented my drawing on such a text, with one exception, not outstanding in the context of the series, and I refer to it at all only for the general level of its argument.

For the urgency which I now take as a pretext for leaving aside such an aim only masks the difficulty that, in trying to maintain this discourse on the level at which I ought in these writings to present my teaching, I might push it too far from the spoken word which, with its own measures, differs from writing and is essential to the instructive effect I am seeking.

That is why I have taken the expedient offered me by the invitation to lecture to the philosophy group of the union of humanities students to produce an adaptation suitable to my talk; its necessary generality having to accommodate itself to the exceptional character of the audience, but its sole object encountering the collusion of their common preparation, a literary one, to which my title pays homage.

How should we forget in effect that until the end of his life Freud constantly maintained that such a preparation was the first requisite in the formation of analysts, and that he designated the eternal *universitas litterarum* as the ideal place for its institution?

And thus my recourse to the movement of this speech, feverishly restored, by showing whom I meant it for, marks even more clearly those for whom it is not meant. I mean that it is not meant for those who for any reason, psychoanalytic or other, allow their discipline to parade under a false identity; a fault of habit, but its effect on the mind is such that the true identity may appear as simply unliable among others, a sort of refined reduplication whose implications will not be missed by the most acute. So one observes the curious phenomenon of a whole new tack concerning language and symbolization in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, but tressed by many sticky fingers in the pages of Sapir and Jespersen -- amateurish exercise so far, but it is even more the tone which is lacking. A certain seriousness is cause for amusement from the standpoint of veracity. And how could a psychoanalyst of today not realize that his realm of truth is in fact the word, when his whole experience must find in the word alone its instrument, its framework, its material, and even the static of its uncertainties.

As our title suggests, beyond what we call 'the word,' what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language. Thus Edward Sapir (1881-1939) and Jens Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) were among the most important modern linguists, from the outset we have altered informed minds to the extent to which the notion that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts will have to mere thought.

But this 'letter', how are we to take it here? How indeed but literally. By 'letter' we designate that material support which concrete speech borrows from language.

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This simple definition assumes that language not be confused with the diverse psychic and somatic functions which serve it in the individual speaker.

For the primary reason that language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each individual at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it.

Let us note, then, that aphasia, although caused by purely anatomical lesions in the cerebral apparatus which supplies the mental center for these linguistic functions, produces language deficiencies which divide naturally between the two poles of the signifying effect of what we call here 'the letter' in the creation of meaning. A point which will be clarified later.

The speaking subject, if he seems to be thus a slave of language, is all the morose of a discourse in the universal moment of which he finds himself at birth, even if only by dint of his proper name.

Reference to the 'experience of the community' as the substance of this discourse settles nothing. For this experience has as its essential dimension the tradition which the discourse itself founds. This tradition, long before the drama of history gets written into it, creates the elementary structures of culture. And these structures reveal an ordering of possible exchanges which, even unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by language. With the result that the ethnographic duality of nature and culture is giving way to a ternary conception of the human condition: nature, society, and culture, the last term of which could well be equated to language, or that which essentially distinguishes human society from natural societies. But we shall not make of this distinction either a point or a point of departure, leaving to its own obscurity the question of the original relation between work and the signifier. We shall be content, for our little job at the general function of praxis in the genesis of history, to point out that the very society which wished to restore, along with the privileges of the producer, the causal hierarchy of the relations between production and the ideological superstructure to their full political rights, has none the less failed to give birth to an esperanto in which the relations of language to socialist realities would have rendered any literary formalism radically impossible.

As for us, we shall have faith only in those assumptions which have already proven their value by virtue of the fact that language through them has attained the status of an object of scientific investigation. For it is by dint of this fact that linguistics is seen to occupy the key position in this domain, and the reclassification of sciences and regrouping of them around it points up, as is the rule, a revolution in knowledge; only the necessities of communication made us call this volume and this grouping the 'human sciences' given the confusion that this term can be made to hide.

To pinpoint the emergence of linguistic science we may say that, as in the case of all sciences in the modern sense, it is contained in the constitutive moment of a formula is its foundation. This formula is the following:

**S/s**

which is read as: the signifier over the signified, "over" corresponding to the bar separating the two stages. This sign should be attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure although it is not found in exactly this form in any of the numerous schemes, which none the less express it, to be found in the printed version of his lectures of the years 1906-7, 1908-9, and 1910-11, which the piety of a group of his disciples caused to be published under the title, *Cours de linguistique générale*, a work of prime importance for the transmission of a teaching worthy of the name, that is, that one can come to terms with only in its own terms.

That is why it is legitimate for us to give him credit for the formulation S/s by which, in spite of the differences among schools, the beginning of modern linguistics can be recognized.

The thematics of this science is henceforth suspended, in effect, at the primordial position of the signifier and the signified as being distinct order separated initially by a barrier resisting signification. And that is what was to make possible an exact study of the connections proper to the signifier, and of the extent of their function in the genesis of the signified.

For this primordial distinction goes well beyond the discussion concerning the arbitrariness of the sign, as it has been elaborated since the earliest reflections of the ancients, and even beyond the impasse which, through the same period, has been encountered in every discussion of the

bi-universal correspondence between the word and the thing, if only in the mere act of naming. All this, of course, is quite contrary to the appearances suggested by the importance often imputed to the role of the index finger pointing to an object in the learning process of the infants subject learning his mother tongue, of the use in foreign language teaching of so-called "concrete" methods.

One cannot go further along this line of thought than to demonstrate that no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification: in its extreme form this amounts to the proposition that there is no language (lingua) in existence for which there is any question of its inability to cover the whole field of the signified, it being an effect of its existence as a language (lingua) that it necessarily answers all needs. If we try to grasp in language the constitution of the object, we cannot fail to notice that this constitution is to be found only at the level of concept, a very different thing from a simple nominative, and that this thing, when reduced to the noun, breaks up into the double, divergent beam of the "cause" (causa) in which it has taken shelter in the French word chose, and the nothing (rien) to which it has abandoned its Latin dress (rem).

These considerations, important as their existence is for the philosopher, turn us away from the locus in which language questions us as to its very nature. And we will fail to pursue the question further as long as we cling to the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever.

For even reduced to this latter formulation, the heresy is the same - the heresy that leads logical positivism in search of the "meaning of meaning," as its objective is called in the language of the devotees. As a result, we can observe that even a text highly charged with meaning can be reduced, through this sort of analysis, to insignificant bagatelles, all that survives being mathematical algorithms that are, of course, without any meaning.

To return to our formula S/s: if we could infer nothing from it but the notion of the parallelism of its upper and lower terms, each one taken in its globality, it would remain the enigmatic sign of a total mystery. Which of course is not the case.

In order to grasp its function I shall begin by reproducing the classic yet faulty illustration ... by which its usage is normally introduced, and one can see how it opens the way to the kind of error referred to above.

My lecture, I replaced this illustration with another, which has no greater claim to correctness than that it has been transplanted into that incongruous dimension that the psychoanalyst has not yet altogether renounced because of his quite justified feeling that his conformism takes its value entirely from it.

We see that, without greatly extending the scope of the signifier concerned in the experiment, that is, by doubling a noun through the mere juxtaposition of two terms whose complementary meanings ought apparently to reinforce each other, a surprise is produced by an unexpected precipitation of an unexpected meaning: the image of twin doors symbolizing, through the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, the imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation.

It is not only with the idea of silencing the nominalist debate with a low blow that I use this example, but, rather to show how in fact the signifier enters the signified, namely, in a form which, not being immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality. For the blinking gaze of a short-sighted person might be justified in wondering whether this was indeed the signifier as he peered closely at the little enamel signs that bore it, a signifier whose signified would in this call receive its final honors from that double and solemn procession from the upper nave.

But no contrived example can be as telling as the actual experience of truth. So I am happy to have invented the above, since it awoke in the person whose word I most trust a memory of childhood, which having thus happily come to my attention is best placed here.

A train arrives at a station. A little boy and a little girl, brother and sister, are seated in a compartment

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face to face next to the window through which the buildings along the station platform can be seen passing as the train pulls to a stop. "Look," says the brother, "we're at Ladies!"; "Idiot!" replies his sister, "Can't you see we're at Gentlemen."

Besides the fact that the rails in this story materialize the bar in the Saussurian algorithm (and in a form designed to suggest that its resistance may be other than dialectical), we should add that only someone who didn't have his eyes in front of the holes (it's the appropriate image here) could possibly confuse the place of the signifier and the signified in this story, or not see from what radiating center the signifier sends forth its light into the shadows of incomplete significations.

For this signifier will now carry a purely animal Dissension, destined for the usual oblivion of natural mists, to the unbridled power of ideological warfare, relentless for families, a torment to the Gods. For these children, Ladies and Gentlemen will be henceforth two countries towards which each of their souls will strive on divergent wings, and between which a truce will be the more impossible since they are actually the same country and neither can compromise on its own superiority without detracting from the glory of the other.

But enough. It is beginning to sound like the history of France. Which it is more human, as it ought to be, to evoke here than that of England, destined to tumble from the Large to the Small End of Dean Swift's egg.

It remains to be conceived what steps, what corridor, the S of the signifier, visible here in the plurals in which it focuses its welcome beyond the window, must take in order to rest its elbows on the ventilators through which, like warm and cold air, indignation and scorn come hissing out below.

One thing is certain: if the algorithm S/s with its bar is appropriate, access from one to the other cannot in any case have a signification. For in so far as it is itself only pure function of the signifier, the algorithm can reveal only the structure of a signifier in this transfer.

Now the structure of the signifier is, as it is commonly said of language itself, that it should be articulated.

This means that no matter where one starts to designate their reciprocal encroachments and increasing inclusions, these units are subjected to the double condition of being reducible to ultimate differential elements and of combining them according to the laws of a closed order.

The elements, one of the decisive discoveries of linguistics, are phonemes; but we must not expect to find any phonetic consistency in the modulatory variability to which this term applies, but rather the synchronic system of differential couplings necessary for the discernment of sounds in a given language. Through this, one sees that an essential element of the spoken word itself was predestined to flow into the mobile characters which, in a jumble of lower-case Didots or Garamonds, render validly present what we call the "letter," namely, the essentially localized structure of the signifier.

With the second property of the signifier, that of combining according to the laws of a closed order, is affirmed the necessity of the topological substratum of which the term I ordinarily use, namely, the signifying chain, gives an approximate idea: rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings.

Such are the structural conditions that define grammar as the order of constitutive encroachments of the signifier up to the level of the unit immediately superior to the sentence, and lexicology as the order of institutive inclusions of the signifier to the level of the verbal locution.

In examining the limits by which these two exercises in the understanding of linguistic usage are determined, it is easy to see that only the correlations between signifier and signified provide the standard for all research into signification, as is indicated by the notion of "usage" of a taxeme or semanteme which in fact refers to the context just above that of the unit concerned.

But it is not because the undertakings of grammar and lexicology are exhausted within certain limits that we must think that beyond those limits signification reigns supreme. That would be an error.



For the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it. As is seen at the level of the sentence when it is interrupted before the significant term: "I shall never...", "All the same it is...", "And yet there may be..." Such sentences are not without meaning, a meaning all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it.

But the phenomenon is no different which by the mere recoil of a "but" brings it to the light, comely as the Shulamite, honest as the dew, the negress adorned for the wedding and poor woman ready for the auction-block.

From which we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning "insists" but that none of its elements "consists" in the signification of which it is at the moment capable.

We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier - which Ferdinand de Saussure illustrates with an image resembling the wavy lines of the upper and lower Waters in miniatures from manuscripts of Genesis; a double flux marked by fine streaks of rain, vertical dotted lines supposedly confining segments of correspondence.

All our experience runs counter to this linearity, which made me speak once, in one of my seminars on psychosis, of something more like "anchoring points" ("points de captation") as a schema for taking into account the dominance of the letter in the dramatic transformation that dialogue can effect in the subject.

The linearity that Saussure holds to be constitutive of the chain of discourse, in conformity with its emission by a single voice and with its horizontal position in our writing - if this linearity is necessary, in fact, it is not sufficient. It applies to the chain of discourse only in the direction in which it is oriented in time, being taken as a signifying factor in all languages in which "Peter hits Paul" reverses its time when the terms are inverted.

But one has only to listen to poetry, which Saussure was no doubt in the habit of doing, for a polyphony to be heard, for it to become clear that all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score.

There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended "vertically," as it were, from that point.

Let us take our word "tree" again, this time not as an isolated noun but at the point of one of these punctuations, and see how it crosses the bar of the Saussurian algorithm. (The anagram of "arbre" and "barre" should be noted.)

For even broken down into the double specter of its vowels and consonants, it can still call up with the robur and the plane tree the significations it takes on, in the context of our flora, of strength and majesty. Drawing on all the symbolic contexts suggested in the Hebrew of the Bible, it erects on a barren hill the shadow of the cross. Then reduces to the capital Y, the sign of dichotomy which, except for the illustration used by heraldry, would owe nothing to the tree however genealogical we may think it. Circulatory tree, tree of life of the cerebellum, tree of Saturn, tree of Diana, crystals formed in a tree struck by lightning, is it your figure that traces our destiny for us in the tortoise-shell cracked by the fire, or your lightning that causes the slow shift in the axis of being to surge up from an unnameable night into the Enpanta of language:

No! says the Tree, it says No! in the shower of sparks

Of its superb head lines that require the harmonics of the tree just as much as their continuation:

Which the storm treats as universally. As it does a blade of grass.

For this modern verse is ordered according to the same law of parallelism of the signifier that creates the harmony governing the primitive Slavic epic or the most refined Chinese poetry.

As is seen in the fact that the tree and the blade of grass are chosen from the same mode of the existent in order for the signs of contradiction - saying "No!" and "treat as" - to affect them, and also so as to bring about, through the categorical contrast of the particularity of "superb" with the "universally" that reduces it, in the condensation of the "head" (tete) and the "storm" (tempete), the indiscernible shower of sparks of the eternal instant.



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But this whole signifier can only operate, it may be said, if it is present in the subject. It is this objection that I answer by supposing that it has pass over to the level of the signified.

For what is important is not that the subject knows anything whatsoever. (If Ladies and Gentlemen were written in a language unknown to the little boy and girl, their quarrel would simply be the more exclusively a quarrel over words, but no less ready to take on signification.)

What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a language, to use it in order to signify something quite other than what it says. This function of speech is more worth pointing out than that of "disguising the thought" (more often than not indefinable) of the subject; it is no less than the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for the true.

I have only to plant my tree in a location; climb the tree, even project on to it the cunning illumination a descriptive context gives to a word; raise it (arborer) so as not to let myself be imprisoned in some sort of communiqué of the facts, however official, and if I know the truth, make it heard, in spite of all the between-the-lines censures by the only signifier my acrobatics through the branches of the tree can constitute, provocative to the point of burlesque, or perceptible only to the practiced eye, according to whether I wish to be heard by the mob or by the few.

The properly signifying function thus depicted in language has a name. we learned this name in some grammar of our childhood, on the last page, where the shade of Quintillian, relegated to some phantom chapter concerning "final consideration on style," seemed suddenly to speed up his voice in an attempt to get in all he had to say before the end.

It is among the figures of style, or tropes - from which the verb "to find" (trouver) comes to us - that this name is found. This name is metonymy.

I shall refer only to the example given there: "thirty sails." For the disquietude I felt over the fact that the word "ship," concealed in this expression, seemed, by taking on its figurative sense, through the endless repetition of the same old example, only to increase its presence, obscured (voilait) not so much those illustrious sails (voiles) as the definition they were supposed to illustrate.

The part taken for the whole, we said to ourselves, and if the thing is to be taken seriously, we are left with very little idea of the importance of this fleet, which "thirty sails" is precisely supposed to give us: for each ship to have just one said is in fact the least likely possibility.

By which we see that the connexion between ship and sail is nowhere but in the signifier, and that it is in the word-to-word connexion that metonymy is based.

I shall designate as metonymy, then, the one side (versant) of the effective field constituted by the signifier, so that meaning can emerge there.

The other side is metaphor. Let us immediately find an illustration: Quillet's dictionary seemed an appropriate place to find a sample that would not seem to be chosen for my own purposes, and I didn't have to go any further than the well-known line of Victor Hugo:

His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful...under which aspect I presented metaphor in my seminar on the psychoses.

It should be said that modern poetry and especially the Surrealist school have taken us a long way in this direction by showing that any conjunction of two signifiers would be equally sufficient to constitute a metaphor, except for the additional requirement of the greatest possible disparity of the images signified, needed for the production of the poetic spark, or in other words for metaphoric creation to take place.

It is true this radical position is based on the experiment known as automatic writing, which would not have been attempted if its pioneers had not been reassured by the Freudian discovery. But it remains a confused position because the doctrine behind it is false.

The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized, it flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain.

One word for another: that is the formula of the metaphor and if you are a poet you will produce for your own delight a continuous stream, a dazzling tissue of metaphors. If the result is the sort of intoxication of the dialogue that Jean Tardieu wrote under this title, that is only because he was giving us a demonstration of the radical superfluosity of all signification in a perfectly convincing representation of a bourgeois comedy.

It is obvious that in the line of Hugo cited above, not the slightest spark of light springs from the proposition that the sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful, for the reason that there is no question of the sheaf's having either the merit or demerit of these attributes, since the attributes, like the sheaf, belong to the Booz, who exercises the former in disposing of the latter and without informing the latter of his sentiments in the case.

If, however, his sheaf does refer us to Booz, and this is indeed the case, it is because it has replaced him in the signifying chain at the very place where he was to be exalted by the sweeping away of greed and spite. But now Booz himself has been swept away by the sheaf, and hurled into the outer darkness where greed and spite harbor him in the hollow of their negation.

But once his sheaf has thus usurped his place, Booz can no longer return there; the slender thread of the little word his that binds him to it is only one more obstacle to his return in that it links him to the notion of possession that retains him at the heart of greed and spite. So his generosity, affirmed in the passage, is yet reduced to less than nothing by the munificence of the sheaf which, coming from nature, knows neither our reserve nor our rejections, and even in its accumulation remains prodigal by our standards.

But if in this profusion the giver has disappeared along with his gift, it is only in order to rise again in what surrounds the figure of speech is what he was annihilated. For it is the figure of the burgeoning of fecundity, and it is this that announces the surprise that the poem celebrates, namely, the promise that the old man will receive in the sacred context of his accession to paternity.

So it is between the signifier in the form of the proper name of a man and the signifier that metaphorically abolishes him that the poetic spark is produced, and it is in this case all the more effective in realizing the signification of paternity in that it reproduces the mythical event in terms of which Freud reconstructed the progress, in the unconscious of all men, of the paternal mystery.

Modern metaphor has the same structure. So the line Love is a pebble laughing in the sunlight, recreates love in a dimension that seems to me most tenable in the face of its imminent lapse into the mirage of narcissistic altruism.

We see, then, that metaphor occurs at the precise point at which sense emerges from non-sense, that is, at the frontier which, as Freud discovered, when crossed the other way produces the word that in French is the word par excellence, the word that is simply the signifier "esprit"; it is at this frontier that we realize that man defies his very destiny when he derides the signifier. But to come back to our subject, what does man find in metonymy if not the power to circumvent the obstacles of social censure? Does not this form, which gives its field to truth in its very oppression, manifest a certain servitude inherent in its presentation?

One may read with profit a book by Leo Strauss, from the land that traditionally offers asylum to those who choose freedom, in which the author reflects on the relation between the art of writing and persecution. By pushing to its limits the sort of connaturality that links this art to that condition, he lets us glimpse a certain something which in this matter imposes its form, in the effect of truth on desire.

But haven't we felt for some time now that, having followed the ways of the letter in search of Freudian truth, we are getting very warm indeed, that it is burning all about us?

Of course, as it is said, the letter killth while the spirit giveth life. We can't help but agree, having had to pay homage elsewhere to a noble victim of the error of seeking the spirit in the letter; but we should also like to know how the spirit could live without the letter. Even so, the pretensions of the spirit would remain unassailable if the letter had not shown us that it produces all the effects of truth in man without involving the spirit at all. It is none other than Freud who had this revelation, and he called his discovery the unconscious.

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### The Letter in the Unconscious

In the complete works of Freud, one out of every three pages is devoted to philological references, one out of every two pages to logical inferences, everywhere a dialectical apprehension of experience, the proportion of analysis of language increasing to the extent that the unconscious is directly concerned.

Thus in "The Interpretation of Dreams" every page deals with what I call the letter of the discourse, in its texture, its usage, its immanence in the matter in question. For it is with this work that the work of Freud begins to open the royal road to the unconscious. And Freud gave us notice of this; his confidence at the time of launching this book in the early days of this century only confirms what he continued to proclaim to the end: that he had staked the whole of his discovery on this essential expression of his message.

The first sentence of the opening chapter announces what for the sake of exposition could not be postponed: that the dream is a rebus. And Freud goes on to stipulate what I have said from the start, that it must be understood quite literally. This derives from the agency in the dream of that same literal (or phonematic) structure in which the signifier is articulated and analyzed in discourse. So the unnatural image of the boat on the roof, or the man with a comma for a head, which are specifically mentioned by Freud, are examples of dream-images that are to be taken only for their value as signifiers, that is to say, in so far as they allow us to spell out the "proverb" presented by the rebus of the dream. The linguistic structure that enables us to read dreams is the very principle of the "significance of the dream," the Traumdeutung.

Freud shows us in every possible way that the value of the image as signifier has nothing whatever to do with its signification, giving us as an example Egyptian hieroglyphics in which it would be sheer buffoonery to pretend that in a given text the frequency of a vulture, which is an aleph, or of a chick, which is a vau, indicating a form of the verb "to be" or a plural, prove that the text has anything to do at all with these ornithological specimens. Freud finds in this writing certain uses of the signifier that are lost in ours, such as the use of determinatives, where a categorical figure is added to the literal figuration of a verbal term; but this is only to show us that even in this writing, the so-called "ideogram" is a letter.

But it does not require the current confusion on this last term for there to prevail in the minds of psychoanalysts lacking linguistic training the prejudice in favor of a symbolism deriving from natural analogy, or even of the image as appropriate to the instinct. And to such an extent that, outside the French school, which has been alerted, a distinction must be drawn between reading coffee grounds and reading hieroglyphics, by recalling to its own principles a technique that could not be justified were it not directed towards the unconscious.

It must be said that this is admitted only with difficulty and that the mental vice denounced above enjoys such favor that today's psychoanalyst can be expected to say that he decodes before he will come around to taking the necessary tour with Freud (turn as the statue of Champollion, says the guide) that will make him understand that what he does is decipher; the distinction is that a cryptogram takes on its full dimension only when it is in a lost language.

Taking the tour is simply continuing in the Traumdeutung.

Entstellung, translated as "distortion" or "transposition," is what Freud shows to be the general precondition for the functioning of the dream, and it is what I designated above, following Saussure, as the sliding of the signified under the signifier, which is always active in discourse (its action, let us note, is unconscious).

But what we call the two "sides" of the effect of the signifier on the signified are also found here. Verdichtung, or "condensation," is the structure of the superimposition of the signified which metaphor takes as its field, and whose name, condensing in itself the word Dichtung, shows how the mechanism is connatural with poetry to the point that it envelops the traditional function proper to poetry.

In the case of Verschiebung, "displacement," the German term is closer to the idea of that veering off of signification that we see in metonymy and which from its first appearance in Freud is represented as the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship.

What distinguishes these two mechanisms, which play such a privileged role in the dream-work (Traumarbeit), from their homologous function in discourse? Nothing, except a condition imposed upon the signifying material, called *Rucksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, which must be translated by "consideration of the means of representation." (The translation by "role of the possibility of figurative expression" being too approximative here.) But this condition constitutes a limitation operating within the system of writing: this is a long way from dissolving the system into a figurative semiology on a level with phenomena of natural expression. This fact could perhaps shed light on the problem involved in certain modes of pictography which, simply because they have been abandoned in writing as imperfect, are not therefore to be regarded as mere evolutionary stages. Let us say, then, that the dream is like the parlor-game in which one is supposed to get the spectators to guess some well-known saying or variant of it solely by dumb-show. That the dream uses speech makes no difference since for the unconscious it is only one among several elements of the representation. It is precisely the fact that both the game and the dream run up against a lack of taxematic material for the representation of such logical articulations as causality, contradiction, hypothesis, etc., that proves they are a form of writing rather than of mine. The subtle processes that the dream is seen to use to represent these logical articulations, in a much less artificial way than games usually employ, are the objects of a special study in Freud in which we see once more confirmed that the dream-work follows the laws of the signifier.

The rest of the dream-elaboration is designed as secondary by Freud, the nature of which indicates its value: they are phantasies or day-dreams (Tagtraum) to use the term Freud prefers in order to emphasize their function of wish-fulfillment (Wunsch Erfüllung). Given the fact that these phantasies may remain unconscious, their distinctive feature is in this case their signification. Now, concerning these phantasies, Freud tells us that ...

That is why any rectification of psychoanalysis must inevitably involve a return to the truth of that discovery, which, taken in its original moment, is impossible to obscure.

For in the analysis of dreams, Freud intends only to give us the laws of the unconscious in their most general extension. One of the reasons why dreams were most propitious for this demonstration is exactly, Freud tells us, that they reveal the same law whether in the normal person or in the neurotic.

But, in either case, the efficacy of the unconscious does not cease in the waking state. The psychoanalytic experience does nothing other than establish that the unconscious leaves none of our actions outside its field. ...

It is a matter, therefore, of defining the topography of this unconscious. I say that it is the very topography defined by the algorithm: S/s

Is the place that I occupy as the subject of a signifier concentric or excentric, in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified? - that is the question.

It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of whether I am the same as that of which I speak. And it is not at all inappropriate to use the word "thought" here. For Freud uses the term to designate the elements involved in the unconscious, that it is the signifying mechanisms that we now recognize as being there.

It is nonetheless true that the philosophical cogitation is at the center of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself, and even in the mistrust he has learned to practice against the traps of self-love.

Furthermore, if, turning the weapon of metonymy against the nostalgia that it serves, I refuse to seek any meaning beyond tautology, if in the name of "war is war" and "a penny is a penny" I decide to be only what I am, how even here can I elude the obvious fact that I am in that very act? And it is no less true if I take myself to the other, metaphoric pole of the signifying process, and if I dedicate myself to becoming what I am, to coming into being, I cannot doubt that even if I lose myself in the process I am in that process. Now it is on these very points, where evidence will be subverted by the empirical, that the trick of the Freudian conversion lies.

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The signifying game between metonymy and metaphor, up to and including the active edge that splits my desire between a refusal of the signifier and a lack of being, and links my fate to the question of my destiny, this game, in all its inexorable subtlety, is played until the match is called, there where I am not, because I cannot situate myself there. That is to say, what is needed is more than these words with which, for a brief moment I disconcerted my audience: I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think. Words that render sensible to an ear properly attuned with what elusive ambiguity the ring of meaning flees from our grasp along the verbal thread. What one ought to say is: I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought, I think of what I am where I do not think to think. This two-sided mystery is linked to the fact that the truth can be evoked only in that dimension of alibi in which all "realism" in creative works takes its virtue from metonymy; it is likewise linked to this other fact that we acceded to meaning only through the double twist of metaphor when we have the one and only key: the S and the s of Saussurian algorithm are not only the same level, and man only deludes himself when he believes his true place is at their axis, which is nowhere. Was nowhere, that is, until Freud discovered it; for if what Freud discovered isn't that, it isn't anything.

The contents of the unconscious with all their disappointing ambiguities give us no reality in the subject more consistent than the immediate; their virtue derives from the truth and in the dimension of being: Kern unseres Wesen are Freud's own terms.

The double-triggered mechanism of metaphor is the very mechanism by which the symptom, in the analytic sense, is determined. Between the enigmatic signifier of the sexual trauma and the term that is substituted for it in an actual signifying chain there passes the spark that fixes in a symptom the signification inaccessible to the conscious subject in which that symptom may be resolved - a symptom being a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element.



Task What do you mean by S/s?

And the enigmas that desire seems to pose for a "natural philosophy," its frenzy mocking the abyss of the infinite, the secret collusion with which it envelops the pleasure of knowing and of dominating with jouissance sexual pleasure, these amount to no other derangement of instinct than that of being caught in the rails - eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else - metonymy. Hence its "perverse" fixation at the very suspension-point of the signifying chain where the memory-screen is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish is petrified.

There is no other way of conceiving the indestructibility of unconscious desire - in the absence of a need which, when forbidden satisfaction, does not sicken and die, even if it means the destruction of the organism itself. It is in a memory, comparable to what is called by that name in our modern thinking-machines (which are in turn based on an electronic realization of the composition of signification), it is in this sort of memory that is found the chain that insists on reproducing itself in the transference, and which is the chain of dead desire.

It is the truth of what this desire has been in his history that the patient cries out through his symptom, as Christ said that the stones themselves would have cried out if the children of Israel had not lent them their voice. ...

Thus, to speak of the precise point we are treating in my seminars on Freud, little Hans, left in the lurch at the age of five by his symbolic environment, and suddenly forced to face the enigma of his sex and his existence, developed, under the direction of Freud and of his father, Freud's disciple, in the mythic form, around the signifying crystal of his phobia, all the permutations possible on a limited number of signifiers.

The operation shows that even on the individual level the solution of the impossible is brought within man's reach by the exhaustion of all possible forms of the impossibilities encountered in solution by recourse to the signifying equation. It is a striking demonstration that illuminates the



labyrinth of a case which so far has only been used as a source of demolished fragments. We should be struck too, by the fact that it is in the coextensivity of the development of the symptom and of its curative resolution that the nature of the neurosis is revealed: whether phobic, hysterical, or obsessive, the neurosis is a question that being poses for the subject "from where it was before the subject came into the world" (Freud's phrase, which he used in explaining the Oedipal complex to little Hans).

The "being" referred to is that which appears in a lightning moment in the void of the verb "to be" and I said that it poses its question for the subject. What does that mean? It does not pose it in front of the subject, since the subject cannot come to the place where it is posed, but it poses it in place of the subject, that is to say, in that place it poses the question with the subject, as one poses a problem with a pen, or as Aristotle's man thought with his soul.

Thus Freud introduced the ego into his doctrine, by defining it according to the resistances that are proper to it. What I have tried to convey is that these resistances are of an imaginary nature much in the same sense as those coaptive lures that the ethology of animal behavior shows us in display or combat, and that these lures are reduced in man to the narcissistic relation introduced by Freud, which I have elaborated in my essay on the mirror stage. I have tried to show that by situating in this ego the synthesis of the perceptual functions in which the sensori-motor selections are integrated, Freud seems to abound in that delegation that is traditionally supposed to represent reality for the ego, and that this reality is all the more included in the suspension of the ego.

For this ego, which is notable in the first instance for the imaginary inertias that it concentrates against the message of the unconscious, operates solely with a view to covering the displacement constituted by the subject with a resistance that is essential to the discourse as such.

That is why an exhaustion of the mechanisms of defense, which Fenichel the practitioner shows us so well in his studies of analytic technique (while his whole reduction on the theoretical level of neuroses and psychoses to genetic anomalies in libidinal development is pure platitude), manifests itself, without Fenichel's accounting for it or realizing it himself, as simply the reverse side of the mechanisms of the unconscious. Periphrasis, hyperbaton, ellipsis, suspension, anticipation, retraction, negation, digression, irony, these are the figures of style (Quintillian's *figurae sententiarum*); as catharsis, litotes, antonomasia, hypotyposis are the tropes, whose terms suggest themselves as the most proper for the labeling of these mechanisms. Can one really see these as mere figures of speech when it is the figures themselves that are the active principle of the rhetoric of the discourse that the analyst in fact utters?

By persisting in describing the nature of resistance as a permanent emotional state, thus making it alien to the discourse, today's psychoanalysts have simply shown that they have fallen under the blow of one of the fundamental truths that Freud rediscovered through psychoanalysis. One is never happy making way for a new truth, for it always means making our way into it: the truth is always disturbing. We cannot even manage to get used to it. We are used to the real. The truth we repress.

Now it is quite specially necessary to the scientist, to the seer, even to the quack, that he should be the only one to know. The idea that deep in the simplest (and even sickest) of souls there is something ready to blossom is bad enough! But if someone seems to know as much as they about what we ought to make of it ... then the categories of primitive, prelogical, archaic, or even magic thought, so easy to impute to others, rush to our aid! It is not right that these nonentities keep us breathless with enigmas that prove to be only too unrealizable. To interpret the unconscious as Freud did, one would have to be as he was, an encyclopedia of the arts and muses, as well as an assiduous reader of the *Fliegende Blätter*. And the task is made no easier by the fact that we are at the mercy of a thread woven with allusions, quotations, puns, equivocations. And is that our profession, to be antidotes to trifles?

Yet that is what we must resign ourselves to. The unconscious is neither primordial nor instinctual; what it knows about the elementary is no more than the elements of the signifier.

The three books that one might call canonical with regard to the unconscious - *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* - are simply a web of examples whose development is inscribed in the formulas of connexion and

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substitution (though carried to the tenth degree by their particular complexity - diagrams of them are sometimes provided by Freud by way of illustration); these are the formulas we give to the signifier in its function that the term *Übertragung*, or transference, is introduced, which later gives its name to the mainspring of the intersubjective link between analyst and analysand.

Such diagrams are not only constitutive of each of the symptoms in a neurosis, but they alone make possible the understanding of the thematic of its course and resolution. The great case-histories provided by Freud demonstrate this admirably. To fall back on a more limited incident, let me cite the article on fetishism of 1927, and the case Freud reports there of a pianist who, to achieve sexual satisfaction, needed a certain shine on the nose (*Glanz auf der Nase*); analysis showed that his early, English-speaking years had seen the displacement of the burning curiosity that he felt for the phallus of his mother, that is to say, for the eminent *manqué-a-etre*, for that lack-of-being, whose privileged signifier Freud revealed for us, into a glance at the nose in the forgotten language of his childhood, rather than a shine on the nose.

It is the abyss opened up at the thought that a thought should make itself heard in the abyss that provoked resistance to psychoanalysis from the outset. And not, as is commonly said, the emphasis on man's sexuality. This latter has after all been the dominant object in literature throughout the ages. And in fact the more recent evolution of psychoanalysis has succeeded by a bit of comical legerdemain in turning it into a quite moral affair, the cradle and trysting-place of oblativity and attraction. The Platonic setting of the soul, blessed and illuminated, rises straight to paradise.

The intolerable scandal in the time before Freudian sexuality was sanctified was that it was so "intellectual." It was precisely in that that it showed itself to be the worthy ally of all those terrorists whose plottings were going to ruin society.

At a time when psychoanalysts are busy remodeling psychoanalysis into a right-thinking movement whose crowning expression is the sociological poem of the autonomous ego, I would like to say, to all those who are listening to me, how they can recognize bad psychoanalysis; this is by the word they use to deprecate all technical or theoretical research that carried forward the Freudian experience along its authentic lines. That word is "intellectualization" - execrable to all those who, living in fear of being tried and found wanting by the wine of truth, spit on the bread of men, although their slaver can no longer have any effect other than that leavening. ...

The end that Freud's discovery proposes for man was defined by him at the apex of his thought in these moving terms: *We es war, soll Ich werden*. *Es* refers to the id or the unconscious, so this means "where the unconscious was, consciousness shall go." I must come to the place where that was. This is one of reintegration and harmony, I could even say of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). But if we ignore the self's radical excentricity to itself with which man is confronted, in other words, the truth discovered by Freud, we shall falsify both the order and methods of psychoanalytic mediation.

The answer is that the slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier, in this case in the procedures of exegesis, changes the whole course of history by modifying the lines which anchor his being. It is in precisely this way that Freudianism, however misunderstood it has been, and confused the consequences, to anyone capable of perceiving the changes we have lived through in our own lives, is seen to have founded an intangible but radical revolution. No need to collect witnesses to the fact: everything involving not just the human sciences, but the destiny of man, politics, metaphysics, literature, art, advertising, propaganda, and through these even the economy, everything has been affected.

Is all this anything more than the unharmonized effect of an immense truth in which Freud traced for us a clear path? What must be said, however, is that any technique which bases its claim on the mere psychological categorization of its object is not following this path, and this is the case of psychoanalysis today except insofar as we return to the Freudian discovery. Likewise the vulgarity of the concepts by which it recommends itself to us, the embroidery of Freudery which is no longer anything but decoration, as well as the bad repute in which it seems to prosper, all bear witness to its fundamental denial of its founder. Freud, by his discovery, brought within the circle of science the boundary between being and the object which seemed before to mark its outer

limit. That this is the symptom and the prelude of a re-examination of the situation of man in the existent such as has been assumed up to the present by all our postulates of knowledge – don't be content, I beg of you, to write this off as another case of Heideggerianism, *s* even prefixed by a neo- which adds nothing to the trashcan style in which currently, by the use of his ready-made mental jetsam, one excuses oneself from any real thought. When I speak of Heidegger, or rather when I translate him, I at least make the effort to leave the word he proffers us its sovereign significance. If I speak of being and the letter, if I distinguish the other and the Other, it is only because Freud shows me that they are the terms to which must be referred the effects of resistance and transfer against which, in the twenty years I have engaged in what we all call after him the impossible practice of psychoanalysis, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), German existentialist philosopher. I have done unequal battle. And it is also because I must help others not to lose their way there. It is to prevent the field of which they are the inheritors from becoming barren, and for that reason to make it understood that if the symptom is a metaphor, it is not a metaphor to say so, no more than to say that man's desire is a metonymy. For the symptom is a metaphor whether one likes it or not, as desire

Is a metonymy for all that men mock the idea. Finally, if I am to rouse you to indignation that, after so many centuries of religious hypocrisy and philosophical bravado, nothing valid has yet been articulated on what links metaphor to the question of being and metonymy to its lack, there must be an object there to answer to that indignation both as its provocator and its victim; it is humanistic man and the credit, affirmed beyond reparation, which he has drawn on his intentions.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) The instance of the letter in the unconscious published is ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1966 | (b) 1961 |
| (c) 1960 | (d) 1965 |
- (ii) S/s indicates ..... .
- |                                      |                                  |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (a) the signifier                    | (b) the signified over signifier |
| (c) the signifier over the signified | (d) none of these                |
- (iii) Interpretation of dreams refers to the process of ..... .
- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| (a) mental activity    | (b) physical activity |
| (c) spiritual activity | (d) none of these     |
- (iv) Lacan's letter originally delivered as a ..... .
- |            |                   |
|------------|-------------------|
| (a) speech | (b) talk          |
| (c) text   | (d) none of these |

### 14.4 Summary

- Lacan's "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud".
- Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst in the Freudian school. Lacan specifically worked to incorporate structuralism into Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In his 1957 essay, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," Lacan argues that the subconscious is structured like language, through chains of signification.
- Lacan begins his essay by stating that he uses the term "letter" quite literally and means by it "that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language". He goes on to remind us of the structure of language and lays out an algorithm which he says is at the foundation of linguistics: "S/s which is read as: as the signifier over the signified". He claims that this algorithm is appropriate because "in so far as it is itself only pure function of the

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signifier, the algorithm can reveal only the structure of a signifier in transfer". It is because the signifier and signified are separate "that no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification". Lacan uses an example of two children on a train who believe, because of their relative positions, that they have reached either a stop called "Ladies" or one called "Gentlemen." Lacan explains that this example shows how "the signifier sends forth...incomplete significations". In this example the children each see a sign over a public restroom. While what is represented by each sign is merely a specific type of restroom, the signification of the signs for the children is something else altogether. In this way the signifier (rest room sign) gives, not incorrect, but incomplete signification.

- Lacan brings together the ideas of S/s and signifiers' incomplete significations to form a chain of signifiers where one signifier merely slides along and signifies other signifiers. Because of this he claims we must "accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier". Lacan notes that Saussure began to articulate this action but stopped short because his analysis took place only linearly. Lacan argues that to fully understand the chain of signifiers, one must recall a number of contexts that operate simultaneously. He claims that for a signifier to fully operate, it must have "passed over to the level of the signified". This "passing over" "discloses the possibility...[of] us[ing] it in order to signify something quite other than what it says". This discovery underscores the importance of metaphor and metonymy because they function precisely by signifying something other than they claim: part of a whole for metonymy and substitution of unlike things for metaphor. Metaphor and metonymy are at the heart of the structure of language and their functioning depends not on equality but on difference and word-to-word relations.
- Lacan goes on to explain how this understanding of the structure of language should be applied to Freudian psychoanalysis. He notes that from the very beginning of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud proclaims that dreams are to be understood literally. They are coded meanings and the way to access meaning is through analysis of what is present. Lacan explains that as in language, "the value of the image as signifier has nothing whatever to do with its signification" in interpreting dreams. He further notes the similarities between the mechanisms of dreams and of discourse and states that language is one of the many forms of representation in dreams. Because of this, Lacan argues that the structure of the unconscious is also S/s and that neither the unconscious, nor language, can function outside of this structure .
- Lacan's description of the chain of signifiers in conjunction with his emphasis on metaphor and metonymy reminded me of Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea: a Novel in Letters*. While it has been years since I last read this novel and the specific details of it escape me, the basic structure will serve to illustrate Lacan's essay. The novel tracks the correspondence (letters) between members of a fictitious community as the members are banned from using certain letters of the alphabet. Immediately one sees the presence of the signified sliding under the signifier by the double meanings of the term "letters." This double meaning hinges on metonymy as alphabetic letters make up letters of correspondence. As the novel progresses and alphabetic letters are lost, the nature of the characters' letters of correspondence change. As alphabetic letters are banned, their presence in the novel is eliminated which highlights the Lacanian principle that the absence of the signifier can induce signification. In *Ella Minnow Pea*, the absence of certain alphabetic letters in the characters' correspondence indicates which letters have been banned. Therefore, the absence of the letters (understood as signifiers) indicates significance, insofar as the absence signifies the law at a given moment in the novel. As an aside, I must note the relevance of using an epistolary novel about alphabetic letters occurred to me as an example of Lacan's argument of the presence of the letter in the unconscious.

## 14.5 Key-Words

Notes

1. Metafiction : A short story or novel which exploits the idea that it is (only) fiction, a fiction about fiction. Arguably, however, there are metafictional dimensions in any work of fiction.
2. Metaphor : A basic trope or figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of its resemblance to another thing, e.g. the verb 'to fly' in 'she flew into his arms'.

## 14.6 Review Questions

1. What is the meaning of the texture?
2. Write a brief note on Lacan's The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious.
3. What are the three 'orders' put forward by Lacan?
4. How are lock and desire closely connected in Lacan's theory?
5. Discuss Lacan's main ideas.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                    (ii) (c)                    (iii) (a)                    (iv) (b)

## 14.7 Further Readings



Books

1. Malcolm Bowie, 'Jacques Lacan' in John Sturrock (ed.) Structuralism and Since. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
2. Sigmund Freud, (translated J. Strachey). Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, London: Penguin Books, 1973.
3. Jacques Lacan (translated A. Sheridan), Ecrits: A Selection. London: Tavistock, 1977.
4. Elizabeth Wright Psychoanalytic Criticism, London and New York: Methuen, 1984.



## Unit 15: The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious – Jacques Lacan: Critical Appreciation

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Examine the Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious.
- Understand Lacan's Metonymy and Desire.

### Introduction

Lacan belongs to a bourgeois Catholic family. He was an admirable student, and excelled especially at Latin and Philosophy. In *The Letter in the Unconscious*, Lacan uses his concept of the letter to distance himself from the Jungian approach to symbols and the unconscious. Whereas Jung believes that there is a collective unconscious which works with symbolic archetypes, Lacan insists that we must read the productions of the unconscious *à la lettre* - in other words, literally to the letter (or, more specifically, the concept of the letter which Lacan's essay seeks to introduce).

In Freud's theory of dreams, the individual's unconscious takes advantage of the weakened ego during sleep in order to produce thoughts which have been censored during the individual's wakened life. Using Lacan's concept of the letter, we should be able to see how, in Fink's example, the unconscious cleverly produces the censored thought associated with the word "algorithm". (Of course, this does not actually tell us why this particular hypothetical analysand has consciously censored a thought associated with the word "algorithm".)

### 15.1 Text – Insistence of Letter in the Unconscious

'Nature and Culture' in the study of Unconscious as projected by Jacques Lacan in his essay "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious".

Jacques Lacan, being influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism and psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud, gives insistence on projection of unconscious in a linguistic framework. It is Freud who summarizes unconscious as chaotic and indefinable; Lacan starts his investigation from this point and interprets unconscious in terms of letter or utterance. Lacan analyses unconscious through a linguist's methodology and considers unconscious as structured system like language. His procedure is to recast Freud's key concepts and mechanism into linguistic mode, viewing human mind not as pre-existent to, but as constituted by language we use. Lacan also follows Roman Jakobson's theory of metaphor and metonymy to stimulate and validate his argument. Lacan analyses the entire process of metaphor and metonymy from

psychological point of view and re-defines the signifier-signified in the light of human psychology. In the discussed essay, Lacan emphasizes on the exposition of words or letters considering as the realm of truth. Saussure has established the doctrine that language as structured system and it has a one to one relation with human brain. To study the workings of brain we take the help of language expressed through letters and words. By letter, Lacan designates that material support which concrete speech borrows from language.

Lacan's entire study of unconscious is based on the verbal signs. His theory explores that verbal signs are the valid methodology for investigating the unconscious state of mind. Verbal signs, letters, or signifiers are revelation of human mind, both conscious and unconscious. Our utterances, working in a metonymic process, give adequate representation of psychology, as letters are creation of mind/brain. Lacan states in this context:

"...realm of truth is in fact the word, when his whole experience must find in the word alone its instrument, its framework, its material, and even the static of its uncertainties."

In doing so, Lacan denies arbitrariness of sign, having a constant signified that is well celebrated by Saussure. According to Lacan, there is no constant meaning of a sign, and one signifier leads to another signifier. The very process of signification is operated with a mental process. In Lacanian term, signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification. Lacan insists that mental condition gets illustration through words and phonemes that carry within it the signifying chain. Through the utterances, we can familiar with the state of psychology and hence modern psychologist after Freud insists on the letters, phonemes or signifiers as tools for analyzing unconscious. Lacan, in his investigation, revises the Freudian concept of unconscious and Saussure's theory of signifier and signified. Lacan seems to insist on the metonymic process in his projection and exposition of unconscious. Lacan believes that unconscious is structured like language and can be interpreted from semiotic viewpoint. He defines and interprets the relation between signifier and signified in terms of human psychology. Lacan is of the view that the workings of unconscious are expressed through the letters and the repetition of the letters.

In his essay "The Insistence of the letter in the Unconscious", Lacan exposes the key concept of nature and culture in the formation of unconscious. Nature and Culture take crucial part in the formation of human character as human beings are both natural and a cultural product. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, psychosexual development and Oedipus complex is discussed in terms of pre-linguistic stage of development that he calls the imaginary and the stage after acquisition of language that he calls symbolic. Descartes speaks that there are some innate ideas, which we inherit at the time of our birth that are considered as natural instincts to our character. The infant's gradual discovery of his self and the competence of the distinction between 'self' and 'other' at the 'mirror stage' tries to know the 'other'. The infant gradually develops a longing to know the opposite sex, and feels attractive and constructs the Oedipus complex. Attraction towards opposite sex is very natural to everyone. But these natural instincts are suppressed and dominated by the cultural forces and social taboos and one has to store these desires and feelings in the unconscious. Suppression of natural instincts, desires and fantasies in the unconscious get outlet in the form of hallucination, nightmare, hysteria, mental imbalance and neurotic disease. Moreover, the unfulfilled desires and fantasies stored in unconscious effect the conscious mind too. In the mirror stage the infant discriminates between 'I' and 'other', and become curious to know and see the body of opposite sex in the heyday of life. But socio-cultural taboos and education become the restriction to all these desires. In the later stage of life some fearful incidents or some happenings that lay crucial impact in the development of psychology and create further troubles. Lacan speaks about desire and its efficacy in the construction unconscious and dreams. While Freud says that distortion is the general precondition of for the functioning of dreams, Lacan says that within this precondition there is a sliding of signified under the signifier which is always active in speech and project the unconscious stage of mind.

Lacan illustrates the working of unconscious in the conscious state of mind, which exposed in terms of letters and utterances. To validate his point Lacan mentions one example of a couple of siblings who were traveling by train, sitting face to face near the windows, and when the train had stopped in one station they had seen two urinals, dividing one for gentleman and another for

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ladies. 'Look', says the brother, we're at the Ladies!' 'Idiot', replies the sister, "can't you see we're at Gentleman." Through this instance, Lacan projects the working of unconscious on the conscious. The working of unconscious is exposed through the letters they uttered. The two words-'ladies' and 'gentleman'-do not represent the doors of urinal as ladies and gentleman, but rather show how human desires are discriminates in terms of dividing the urinal. Sexual division of the urinal divides the needs of both the gender. The instance is the perfect representative of the working of culture and social taboos in the formation of psychology. The two words represent the suppressed desires of the boy and the girl, which get expressed in their conscious state of mind. From their utterance, we can get a familiar idea of their unconscious. Lacan believes that words and letters provide a clear view of the unconscious without knowledge of the speaker. Here in this process one signifier leads to another signifier. The letter 'gentleman' signifies the gender discrimination, socio-cultural taboos and the working of unconscious in the conscious. Derrida later studies this theoretical process of signification and he propagates the doctrine of 'plurality of meaning' and considers as 'free play of signs'.

Lacan alters the whole concept of signifier-signified established by Saussure and redefines the arbitrariness of sign where 'tree' is not only a signifier of 'plant'; it signifies more than one signified. Likewise, letters and words or verbal icons, lead to a signifying chain and explore the psychology. In this context, we can make allusion to the fictional works of Poe, especially "The Fall of the House of Usher" where protagonist suffers from hysteria and mental illness caused by the suppressed desires and fantasies. The gloomy and uncanny atmosphere and his deeds are the revelation of his unconscious in the story. Lacan celebrates the post modern concept of referentiality his investigation of signifier and letter. He interprets dream as signifier and emphasizes on the study of memory in psychoanalytical criticism.

Lacan's most celebrated dictum, 'the unconscious is structured like a language', implies that psychoanalysis as a discipline must borrow the methods and concepts of modern linguistics; but he also aims at a critique of modern linguistics from his psychoanalytical vantage point. Thus at the outset of his essay Lacan questions Saussure's assumption that there is nothing problematic about the bond between the signified and the signifier in the verbal sign, by pointing out that the two signifiers, 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen' may refer to the same signified (a WC), or be interpreted in a certain context as apparently contradictory place names. In short, language, the signifying chain, has a life of its own which cannot be securely anchored to a world of things. 'There is a perpetual sliding of the signified under the signifier.' 'No meaning is sustained anything other than reference to another meaning.' Such dicta were to have major repercussions on the theory and practice of interpretation. Lacan's other principal borrowing from modern linguistics was Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy, which Lacan identified with Freud's categories of condensation and displacement, respectively. Here he seems to offer a revised version of his linguistic model without acknowledging the fact. His equation of neurotic symptoms with metaphor and of desire with metonymy is, however, quite compatible with Jakobson's scheme. The points that emerge with most force from this dazzling, wayward, teasing discourse are:

1. that there is no getting outside language, and that language is innately figurative, not transparently referential;
2. that the human subject is constituted precisely by the entry into language, and that the Christian-humanist idea of an autonomous individual self or soul that transcends the limits of language is a fallacy and an illusion. Both ideas (which are fundamental to the Deconstruction school of criticism) can be traced back to Nietzsche, whose cryptic, idiosyncratic expository style also seems to have been a model for Lacan.

## **15.2 Critical Appreciation**

The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud is an essay by the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, originally delivered as a talk on May 9, 1957 and later published in Lacan's 1966 book *Écrits*. Lacan begins the essay by declaring it to be "situated

halfway" between speech and writing. By doing so, he foreshadows both the essay's notorious opacity and its theme: the relationship between speech and language and the place of the subject in relation to both. The paper represents a key moment in 'his resolutely structuralist notion of the structure of the subject', as well as in his gradual 'incorporation of the findings of linguistics and anthropology...in the rise of structuralism'.

### **The Letter in the Unconscious**

Lacan uses his concept of the letter to distance himself from the Jungian approach to symbols and the unconscious. Whereas Jung believes that there is a collective unconscious which works with symbolic archetypes, Lacan insists that we must read the productions of the unconscious *à la lettre* - in other words, literally to the letter (or, more specifically, the concept of the letter which Lacan's essay seeks to introduce).

In Freud's theory of dreams, the individual's unconscious takes advantage of the weakened ego during sleep in order to produce thoughts which have been censored during the individual's wakened life. Using Lacan's concept of the letter, we should be able to see how, in Fink's example, the unconscious cleverly produces the censored thought associated with the word "algorithm". (Of course, this does not actually tell us why this particular hypothetical analysand has consciously censored a thought associated with the word "algorithm".)

### **The Signifier and the Signified**

Because Lacan's use of the concept "the letter" requires a concept of materiality different from anything previously found in linguistics, Lacan argues that the signifier and signified are separated by a bar: 'the signifier over the signified, "over" corresponding to the bar separating the two stages'. The signifiers can slide over the top of this bar, with the signified elements beneath. This means that there is never an easy correlation between signifier and signified and, as a result, all language and communication is actually produced by the failure to fully communicate.

The asymmetrical relationship between signifier and signified is further complicated by the fact that the bar between them cannot itself be signified: 'the S and the s of the Saussurian algorithm are not on the same level, and man only deludes himself when he believes his true place is at their axis'.

### **Phallus**

Such a formulation enabled Lacan subsequently to assert that 'the phallus is a signifier...not a phantasy...[and] even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes'. Theorists such as Slavoj Žižek have frequently pointed out this fact in order to defend Lacan against his feminist critics.

### **Metonymy and Desire, Metaphor and the Subject**

Lacan aligns desire with metonymy and the slide of signifiers above the bar, 'indicating that it is the connection between signifier and signifier that permits the lesion in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation...in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports'. This produces a situation in which desire is never satisfied, 'being caught in the rails - eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else - of metonymy'. Partly for this reason, one's desires can never be identified in a statement along the lines of: 'I desire x, y and z'. Instead, desire is slippery and metonymical.

Lacanian theorists often note that capitalist consumerism is predicated upon this fact about desire: because desire is never satisfied and yet, always sliding from one signifier to the other, the capitalist subject finds him or herself making an endless series of purchases in order to satisfy their desire.

The way out of this metonymical chain of unsatisfied desire, for Lacan, is a "crossing of the bar" by a signifier: Lacan emphasises 'the constitutive value of this crossing for the emergence of signification'. Lacan aligns this operation with metaphor rather than metonymy. When a signifier crosses the bar, from above it to under it, it becomes a signified. But this leaves a space or gap above the bar which, according to Lacan, is the subject. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject

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only appears fleetingly, on those rare occasions when a signifier crosses the bar, leaving an empty space above it.

**"Wo Es war, soll Ich werden"**

With the fleetingness of the subject established, Lacan closes the essay by developing a maxim of Sigmund Freud's: "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden" (usually translated as: "where the id was, the ego shall be"). Rather than strengthening the ego as the great intellectual and ideological rival of Lacanian psychoanalysis, ego psychology, encouraged the patient to do, Lacan claims that the analysand 'must come to the place where that was...modifying the moorings that anchor his being'.

**Criticism**

'Whereas Saussure placed the signifier over the signified, dividing the two by a bar of "meaning", Lacan inverted this arrangement, placing the signified under the signifier, to which he ascribes the primary role'. In the same way, 'unlike Jakobson Lacan associated the Freudian idea of condensation with metaphor and displacement with metonymy'. Critics would contend that we see here a typical example of the way 'Lacan was...an intellectual magpie', illegitimately borrowing the intellectual kudos of linguistics to give a respectable veneer to his psychoanalytic theories, without submitting to the actual rigors of the discipline itself.

Nevertheless, Élisabeth Roudinesco concludes that 'this extraordinary intellectual operation, by means of which Lacan endowed psychoanalytic doctrine with a Cartesian theory of the subject and a "post-Saussurian" conception of the unconscious...alone would earn him a place among the great theoreticians of the twentieth century'.

**Analysis**

Literary critics learn how to read the letter of the text, how to interpret the style, the form, rather than just reading for content, for ideas. The psychoanalyst learns to listen not so much to her patient's main point as to odd marginal moments, slips of the tongue, unintended disclosures. Freud formulated this psychoanalytic method, but Lacan has generalized it into a way of receiving all discourse, not just the analysand's. There is no better way to read Lacan.

The propagation of psychoanalysis . . . has shown us, ever since Freud, that interpretation necessarily represents appropriation, and thus an act of desire and murder.

These two quotations explicitly address psychoanalysis as a way of reading or interpreting, appropriate for a seminar which is to examine psychoanalysis within the frame of literary theory. Gallop offers, or perhaps insists on, a way of reading Lacan, that is to say reading Lacan in a Lacanian, psychoanalytic way. I begin with her statement out of an admitted preference for the slightly peculiar situation it produces for reader/practitioner of literary theory: not to attempt an explanation or application of psychoanalysis to literature, but rather to view psychoanalysis in the light that it has itself shed or cast over literature. To repeat, as it were, the psychoanalytic act (in so far as it acts upon literature as a text) upon the text of psychoanalysis. To elucidate this diacritically, I mean that I will not attempt so much to show what Lacan does to literature - that is, to enumerate the methods he employs while reading, to extract general psychoanalytic principles of literary theory from his texts. Rather I hope to, to borrow Lacan's phrasing, hold up a mirror to the psychoanalytic act of reading. By focusing on the way Lacanian psychoanalysis might read itself I hope to demonstrate and explore key elements of the way Lacanian analysis reads literature. At the same time, it is my intention to place emphasis on this mirror as structure, to better register the reflexive implications of Lacan's texts.

The significance of the second quotation from Kristeva marks the second register of this presentation - placing at the center of the discussion the question of desire and violence, or as she more explicitly puts it, "desire and murder." At this point I am reduced to merely asserting this question or specter of violence in psychoanalytic interpretation as an anticipation, a threat whose presence and influence I will attempt to acknowledge and monitor.



How then does one begin to read Lacan in this way? Gallop has given us various areas of focus: "odd marginal moments, slips of the tongue, unintended disclosures." Already we are at a disadvantage; reading Lacan's notoriously difficult texts "straight" proves almost an impossibility as it is, much less to turn one's attention to that which is not explicit in the text. One could go so far as to argue that everything of importance in Lacan's texts is latent in some sense; and whether or not it is even possible to skirt around this to get to an "unintended disclosure" could be strongly contested. But perhaps this gives us a clue: it would stand to reason (albeit superficially) that if Lacan's significant content is very often latent, hidden, and submerged in his texts, then perhaps what we are looking for as a marginal moment is that which seems, on some level, obvious or so self-apparently intended as to go more or less unnoticed by the complex reader.

So let us begin with the "obvious." In the essay "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan reverses Saussure's concept of the sign, which was represented by the ideogram of signified over sign. He criticized this formulation for its privileging of the signified over the signifier as well as the indication (which Saussure illustrates with arrows going up and down) that there is a reciprocity between the two, a crossable relationship. Saussure presumes a unity between language and concept which ultimately leads into a regression of a representational (referential) theory of language - that is to say, to the unity of signifier and signified, which in Saussure is then capable of referring to the thing. Lacan's reformulation is signifier over signified, and in addition he emphasizes the bar between them, as "a formula of separateness rather than reciprocity of signifier and signified". Lacan "cuts" into the Saussurian sign, upsetting its unity and recasting the signified as an effect of the signifier. This radically undermines any unity of language and concept, and indeed denies the possibility of accessing the concept as such. We are left with the available signifier and its laws.

Moreover, Lacan ascribes to Jakobson's differential structure of language, in which each signifier is reducible to phonemes, or differential elements, and these, operating in a signifying chain, form the basis of meaning. Lacan makes a passage from these phonemes to the letter, which is, as he defines it, "the essentially localized structure of the signifier."

According to Lacan, "the subject is what is represented by the signifier, and the signifier can only represent something for another signifier". Therefore, "the signifier anchors itself to the subject, marking its place with a letter, and whether or not the subject knows, reads or denies it, the subject will function like a signified and will always slide under the signifier. Thus the subject is constituted as secondary in relation to the signifier, while signification has a life of its own". Lacan maintains that the subject, who uses language, is born into and constituted by it, and more specifically is constituted in and through the signifier.

Language or speech does not mask what we believe to be true, but rather the truth speaks through and is produced by language. The subject produces truth about which he does not know by speaking, which is why within the psychoanalytic context the analyst must pay the most attention to the subject's "mistakes," or unintended statements. Lacan then goes on to differentiate and describe the two linguistic forms of metaphor and metonymy:

Metaphor, which is conceived as vertical (after Jakobson) is the substitution of one word for another. Metaphor is the action of poetry, and is characterized by creativity, symbolism, and liberation - liberation from the oppression of the bar between the signified and the signifier. Metaphor "crosses" this bar, as represented in Lacan's mathematical formulation with what looks like a plus sign.

Metonymy, on the other hand, is horizontal, a relation of word to word. It is characterized by lack, and is associated with realism and servitude, that is, the servitude to the burden of the bar, which in its mathematical formulation is represented without a vertical line, therefore giving the appearance, not merely coincidentally, of a minus sign.

But while it would appear that Lacan casts metaphor in strong, positive terms and metonymy in weak, negative ones, he nonetheless asserts that metonymy provides the possibility of metaphor. He refers often to the "insufficiency" of the metaphor, and criticizes the tendency of linguists to privilege metaphor over metonymy. In Gallop's reading of the relationship between the two,

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metaphor cannot be produced or reproduced without metonymy, but once it has crossed over that bar, it is free from the shackles of servitude.

We shift now from this essay to the essay "The Purloined Letter," to see how these principles or concepts figure in the way that Lacan reads this short story by Poe. Fairly early on, Lacan makes this rather mysterious assertion: this sign is indeed that of woman, in so far as she invests her very being therein, founding it outside the law, which subsumes her nonetheless, originarily, in a position of signifier, nay of fetish.

For we know that Lacan believes the letter, that literal letter of the story, to be the signifier, and this passage just quoted, which aligns the woman (the Queen) with the sign (in the position of signifier), recasts the discussion in a complex way. Moreover, Lacan introduces in the same sentence the sexual concept of the fetish, and places it in intimate proximity to the woman and the signifier. It seems that Lacan has double-sexed the signifier in metonymic fashion. The "straight" or obvious reading traces the letter in the story in its function as the letter of the signifier; but the chain woman-signifier-fetish, once introduced, cannot be left behind and thus we are forced to read it alongside (or behind) the first reading. So that when Lacan maintains that destroying the letter . . . [is] the only sure means . . . of being rid of what is destined by nature to signify the annulment of what it signifies we also read letter-as-signifier doubled over with woman-as-signifier-as-fetish. So we read, in fact, "destroying the woman is the only sure means of being rid of what is destined by nature to signify the annulment of what she signifies," and "destroying the fetish is the only sure means of being rid of what is destined by nature to signify the annulment of what the fetish signifies."

And if this "reading under" seems unjustified, or to be based on insufficient evidence, we are then confronted with this explicit metaphor: Just so does the purloined letter, like an immense female body, stretch out across the Minister's office when Dupin enters. But just so does he already expect to find it, and has only, with his eyes veiled by green lenses, to undress that huge body.

The letter, the signifier, is here explicitly female and explicitly sexual. Not only that, but its sexuality is contagious - Lacan repeatedly refers to the "feminization" of the Minister once he has stolen the letter. He "is obliged to don the role of the Queen, and even the attributes of femininity and shadow, so propitious to the act of concealing". When the signifier alters its proximity, or is altered, from Queen to Minister, the Minister "follows the Queen" in attributes and character. Lacan writes,

the Minister . . . came to forget [the letter] . . . But the letter, no more than the neurotic's unconscious, does not forget him. It forgets him so little that it transforms him more and more in the image of her who offered it to his capture, so that he now will surrender it, following her example, to a similar capture.

And now we have yet another complicating association: woman is now not neatly equated with the signifier, but adopts a position of giving it up, "offering" it, as he puts it. We notice how Lacan implies the Queen's active role in the loss of the signifier/letter, how he does not see it so much in terms of a theft but as a quasi-voluntary act of surrender on the part of the woman. The Minister adopts that feminine surrender in his own relation to the letter, "offering" it, as it were, to Dupin in his turn.

And where is Dupin in all of this? We know that Lacan finds an analogue of the analyst in the figure of Dupin; so then his implication in this chain of signifiers is certain to be key. And we do not have to look long for Dupin's metaphorization: he is the "hand of the ravisher", maintaining in a very specific fashion the sexual metaphor of the letter/woman.

And the editors of the essay have added this footnote as a clarification:

[this] might be read as follows: analysis, in its violation of the imaginary integrity of the ego, finds its fantasmatic equivalent in rape (or castration. . . ) But whether that 'rape' occurs from in front or from behind (above or below the mantelpiece) is, in fact, a question of interest for policeman and not analysts.

Let us read this again: analysis is analogous to rape insofar as it "violates" the "imaginary integrity" of the ego. Rape is a metaphor - the chosen metaphor - for psychoanalysis. The justification for this

admittedly violent act is, we repeat, "the imaginary integrity of the ego." To be sure, it is a foundational premise of Lacanian psychoanalysis that the unity of the ego is false, imaginary - and this is why Lacan so viciously attacked ego psychology, which sought to discover and produce this nonexistent unity.

But this does not settle the matter - the matter of the metaphor. Already when we begin to talk of the foundational premises of Lacanian psychoanalysis in this way we neuter the issue; we begin to regard terms such as ego and imaginary and subject as genderless. And this is perhaps in fact what Lacan is trying to or intending to say. But what insists in Lacan's text is in fact the sexed image of woman, of femininity, along with an accompanying image of the rapist/analyst. This is the metaphor of the text. And therefore we only do violence to its signification if we disregard its peculiar substitution: woman for signifier; woman in relation to signifier; woman holding signifier dear; woman at the same time wanting to offer the signifier up. And therefore: man/detective/psychoanalyst violating the signifier in an act justified and to some extent ontologized by the woman's attachment to this thing she believes belongs only to her, which she at the same time wants to offer up.

We find ourselves unavoidably in the realm of an all too familiar rape rhetoric. Woman is raped because on some level woman she wants to be raped. Woman is raped moreover because her body/virtue/virginity is not properly hers or even real, but is only an illusion of unity and ownership, which the rapist will disabuse her of. It follows that it is man's right to rape the woman, because it is an act of truth, of making it clear that there is no such thing as bodily integrity or a right to one's unified self.

And suddenly the psychoanalytic terminology doesn't sound so neutral. It tips over, bows over, to the male, to the phallus, to the analyst. Lacan may maintain the false integrity of the ego and the instability of the signifier in general, intersubjective terms. But what insists, once again, is the woman and her poeticized rapist, the "ravisher" - the sexual metaphor looms over the text and creates a poetry of rape.

So what the letter insists, on the one hand, is woman. On the other hand, the woman is the letter. But in both cases, the pursuance of the letter is agreed upon. Either as woman herself or as what woman holds dear, the letter must be relentlessly pursued.

Lacan again: "The sender, we tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter,' nay, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination".

That is to say, the letter has its destination in and through suffering, through violence, as the object of pursuit. Thus we see that in the way that the signifier always returns to the one who deploys it, only in reverse form, and this is the proper place for the signifier we also read: woman is raped, the thing which she values has been taken, but this is the result of her own concealed invitation for the loss of that value. It comes back to her, in reverse, in its violation. Violence is inscribed at the heart of discourse, an inscription that has a long philosophical and literary tradition, a tradition that includes Sade, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Laplanche and Pontalis write that Lacan wishes "(a. to relate the structure of the unconscious to that of language and to apply to the former the same methods which proved fruitful in linguistics, (b. to show how the human subject comes to be inscribed within a pre-established order which is itself symbolic in nature." What does the reader do then with this metaphoric violence inscribed at the heart of the analytic act, at the heart of language, this violence built on one of the most perfidious and self-justifying myths of female sexuality? We attempt in this reading not to privilege the metaphor but to observe the metaphor's privilege: what does this violence, this desire, do to our pre-established order and to our language? Where may we look for an opening, an escape? Do we look, perhaps, at some of the other "margins" of Lacan's texts, the questions that almost emerge from his writing - that metaphor is, after all insufficient; it lacks something and depends inherently on the metonymic - that no one, perhaps especially men, ever had the phallus nor can ever possess it - that female jouissance might lie outside the realm of phallic articulation and might in fact alter completely all the structures currently holding thrall over language, sexuality, and literature.

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And do we dare suggest, as we read Lacan reading literature, that haunting the straight line of his intention, with its proliferation of discourses on the phallus and metaphor, there might be a shadow, a fear, an unconscious letter that insists, contrary to all intended purposes, that the phallus does not and has never existed, and that we have long been playing with the most apparent and childish of fantasies.

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Lacan asserts that 'the Phallus is a .....' .
  - (a) signifier
  - (b) signified
  - (c) metonymy
  - (d) fantasies
- (ii) Lacan aligns this operations with ..... .
  - (a) metaphor
  - (b) metonymy
  - (c) desire
  - (d) none of these

**15.3 Summary**

- 'Nature and Culture' in the study of Unconscious as projected by Jacques Lacan in his essay "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious".
- Jacques Lacan, being influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism and psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud, gives insistence on projection of unconscious in a linguistic framework. It is Freud who summarizes unconscious as chaotic and indefinable; Lacan starts his investigation from this point and interprets unconscious in terms of letter or utterance. Lacan analyses unconscious through a linguist's methodology and considers unconscious as structured system like language. His procedure is to recast Freud's key concepts and mechanism into linguistic mode, viewing human mind not as pre-existent to, but as constituted by language we use. Lacan also follows Roman Jakobson's theory of metaphor and metonymy to stimulate and validate his argument.
- In his essay "The Insistence of the letter in the Unconscious", Lacan exposes the key concept of nature and culture in the formation of unconscious. Nature and Culture take crucial part in the formation of human character as human beings are both natural and a cultural product. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, psychosexual development and Oedipus complex is discussed in terms of pre-linguistic stage of development that he calls the imaginary and the stage after acquisition of language that he calls symbolic. Descartes speaks that there are some innate ideas, which we inherit at the time of our birth that are considered as natural instincts to our character. The infant's gradual discovery of his self and the competence of the distinction between 'self' and 'other' at the 'mirror stage' tries to know the 'other'. The infant gradually develops a longing to know the opposite sex, and feels attractive and constructs the Oedipus complex. Attraction towards opposite sex is very natural to everyone.
- Lacan illustrates the working of unconscious in the conscious state of mind, which exposed in terms of letters and utterances. To validate his point Lacan mentions one example of a couple of siblings who were traveling by train, sitting face to face near the windows, and when the train had stopped in one station they had seen two urinals, dividing one for gentleman and another for ladies.
- Lacan alters the whole concept of signifier-signified established by Saussure and redefines the arbitrariness of sign where 'tree' is not only a signifier of 'plant'; it signifies more than one signified. Likewise, letters and words or verbal icons, lead to a signifying chain and explore the psychology.
- Lacan uses his concept of the letter to distance himself from the Jungian approach to symbols and the unconscious. Whereas Jung believes that there is a collective unconscious which works with symbolic archetypes, Lacan insists that we must read the productions of the

unconscious à la lettre - in other words, literally to the letter (or, more specifically, the concept of the letter which Lacan's essay seeks to introduce).

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- Lacan aligns desire with metonymy and the slide of signifiers above the bar, 'indicating that it is the connection between signifier and signified that permits the lesion in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation...in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports'.
- Moreover, Lacan ascribes to Jakobson's differential structure of language, in which each signifier is reducible to phonemes, or differential elements, and these, operating in a signifying chain, form the basis of meaning. Lacan makes a passage from these phonemes to the letter, which is, as he defines it, "the essentially localized structure of the signifier."
- According to Lacan, "the subject is what is represented by the signifier, and the signifier can only represent something for another signifier" .

### 15.4 Key-Words

1. **Metonymy** : A basic trope or figure of speech in which the name of an attribute of an object is given for the object itself (e.g. in 'the pen is mightier than the sword', pen is a metonym for writing; sword is a metonym, for fighting or war).
2. **Metre** : The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse—one of the primary characteristics which may be said to distinguish verse from prose.
3. **Mimesis** : (Gk. 'imitation') the idea that literature attempts to represent 'life' or 'the word' more or less accurately, as it 'actually' is, etc.

### 15.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss Metonymy, Desire and Metaphor in the Essays of Lacan.
2. What do you mean by the signifier and the signified? Discuss.
3. Critically examine The Insistence of The Letter in the Unconscious.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (a)

### 15.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Malcolm Bowie, 'Jacques Lacan' in John Sturrock (ed.) *Structuralism and Since*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
2. Sigmund Freud, (translated J. Strachey). *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin Books, 1973.
3. Jacques Lacan (translated A. Sheridan), *Ecrits: A Selection*. London: Tavistock, 1977.
4. Elizabeth Wright *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, London and New York: Methuen, 1984.



## Unit 16: Mikhail Bakhtin and his 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse-Dialogics in Novels: Introduction

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know Early Life of Bakhtin.
- Discuss Career, Works and Ideas of Bakhtin.
- Explain Speech Genre and Other Late Essays.

### Introduction

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His writings, on a variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions (Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism) and in disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, history, philosophy, anthropology and psychology. Although Bakhtin was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s.

Bakhtin had a difficult life and career, and few of his works were published in an authoritative form during his lifetime. As a result, there is substantial disagreement over matters that are normally taken for granted: in which discipline he worked (was he a philosopher or literary critic?), how to periodize his work, and even which texts he wrote. He is known for a series of concepts that have been used and adapted in a number of disciplines: dialogism, the carnivalesque, the chronotope, heteroglossia and "outsidedness" (the English translation of a Russian term *vnenakhodimost*, sometimes rendered into English-from French rather than from Russian-as "exotopy"). Together these concepts outline a distinctive philosophy of language and culture that has at its center the claims that all discourse is in essence a dialogical exchange and that this endows all language with a particular ethical or ethico-political force.

As a literary theorist, Bakhtin is associated with the Russian Formalists, and his work is compared with that of Yuri Lotman; in 1963 Roman Jakobson mentioned him as one of the few intelligent critics of Formalism. During the 1920s, Bakhtin's work tended to focus on ethics and aesthetics in general. Early pieces such as *Towards a Philosophy of the Act and Author* and *Hero in Aesthetic Activity* are indebted to the philosophical trends of the time-particularly the Marburg School Neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen, including Earnest Cassirer, Max Scheler and, to a lesser extent,

Nicolai Hartmann. Bakhtin began to be discovered by scholars in 1963, but it was only after his death in 1975 that authors such as Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov brought Bakhtin to the attention of the Francophone world, and from there his popularity in the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries continued to grow. In the late 1980s, Bakhtin's work experienced a surge of popularity in the West.

Bakhtin's primary works include *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, an unfinished portion of a philosophical essay; *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art*, to which Bakhtin later added a chapter on the concept of carnival and published with the title *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*; *Rabelais and His World*, which explores the openness of the Rabelaisian novel; *The Dialogic Imagination*, whereby the four essays that comprise the work introduce the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope; and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, a collection of essays in which Bakhtin concerns himself with method and culture.

In the 1920s there was a "Bakhtin school" in Russia, in line with the discourse analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson.

## **16.1 Early Life of Mikhail Bakhtin**

Bakhtin was born in Oryol, Russia, to an old family of the nobility. His father was the manager of a bank and worked in several cities. For this reason Bakhtin spent his early childhood years in Orel, Vilnius, and then Odessa, where in 1913 he joined the historical and philological faculty at the local university. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist write: "Odessa..., like Vilnius, was an appropriate setting for a chapter in the life of a man who was to become the philosopher of heteroglossia and carnival. The same sense of fun and irreverence that gave birth to Babel's Rabelaisian gangster or to the tricks and deceptions of Ostap Bender, the picaro created by Ilf and Petrov, left its mark on Bakhtin." He later transferred to Petersburg University to join his brother Nikolai. It is here that Bakhtin was greatly influenced by the classicist F. F. Zelinsky, whose works contain the beginnings of concepts elaborated by Bakhtin.

## **16.2 Career**

Bakhtin completed his studies in 1918 and moved to a small city in western Russia, Nevel (Pskov Oblast), where he worked as a schoolteacher for two years. It was at this time that the first "Bakhtin Circle" formed. The group consisted of intellectuals with varying interests, but all shared a love for the discussion of literary, religious, and political topics. Included in this group were Valentin Voloshinov and, eventually, P. N. Medvedev, who joined the group later in Vitebsk. German philosophy was the topic talked about most frequently and, from this point forward, Bakhtin considered himself more a philosopher than a literary scholar. It was in Nevel, also, that Bakhtin worked tirelessly on a large work concerning moral philosophy that was never published in its entirety. However, in 1919, a short section of this work was published and given the title "Art and Responsibility". This piece constitutes Bakhtin's first published work. Bakhtin relocated to Vitebsk in 1920. It was here, in 1921, that Bakhtin married Elena Aleksandrovna Okolovich. Later, in 1923, Bakhtin was diagnosed with osteomyelitis, a bone disease that ultimately led to the amputation of his leg in 1938. This illness hampered his productivity and rendered him an invalid.

In 1924, Bakhtin moved to Leningrad, where he assumed a position at the Historical Institute and provided consulting services for the State Publishing House. It is at this time that Bakhtin decided to share his work with the public, but just before "On the Question of the Methodology of Aesthetics in Written Works" was to be published, the journal in which it was to appear stopped publication. This work was eventually published 51 years later. The repression and misplacement of his manuscripts was something that would plague Bakhtin throughout his career. In 1929, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Art", Bakhtin's first major work, was published. It is here that Bakhtin introduces the concept of dialogism. However, just as this revolutionary book was introduced, Bakhtin was accused of participating in the Russian Orthodox Church's underground movement. The truthfulness of this charge is not known, even today. Consequently, during one of the many purges of artists and intellectuals that Joseph Stalin conducted during the early years of his rule,

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Bakhtin was sentenced to exile in Siberia but appealed on the grounds that, in his weakened state, it would kill him. Instead, he was sentenced to six years of internal exile in Kazakhstan.

Bakhtin spent these six years working as a book-keeper in the town of Kustanai, during which time he wrote several important essays, including "Discourse in the Novel". In 1936 he taught courses at the Mordovian Pedagogical Institute in Saransk. An obscure figure in a provincial college, he dropped out of view and taught only occasionally. In 1937, Bakhtin moved to Kimry, a town located a couple of hundred kilometers from Moscow. Here, Bakhtin completed work on a book concerning the 18th-century German novel which was subsequently accepted by the Sovetskii Pisatel' Publishing House. However, the only copy of the manuscript disappeared during the upheaval caused by the German invasion.

After the amputation of his leg in 1938, Bakhtin's health improved and he became more prolific. In 1946 and 1949, the defense of this dissertation divided the scholars of Moscow into two groups: those official opponents guiding the defense, who accepted the original and unorthodox manuscript, and those other professors who were against the manuscript's acceptance. The book's earthy, anarchic topic was the cause of many arguments that ceased only when the government intervened. Ultimately, Bakhtin was denied a doctorate and granted a lesser degree by the State Accrediting Bureau. Later, Bakhtin was invited back to Saransk, where he took on the position of chair of the General Literature Department at the Mordovian Pedagogical Institute. When, in 1957, the Institute changed from a teachers' college to a university, Bakhtin became head of the Department of Russian and World Literature. In 1961, Bakhtin's deteriorating health forced him to retire, and in 1969, in search of medical attention, Bakhtin moved back to Moscow, where he lived until his death in 1975.

Bakhtin's works and ideas gained popularity after his death, and he endured difficult conditions for much of his professional life, a time in which information was often seen as dangerous and therefore often hidden. As a result, the details provided now are often of uncertain accuracy. Also contributing to the imprecision of these details is the limited access to Russian archival information during Bakhtin's life. It is only after the archives became public that scholars realized that much of what they thought they knew about the details of Bakhtin's life was false or skewed largely by Bakhtin himself.



*Did u know?* In 1940, and until the end of World War II, Bakhtin lived in Moscow, where he submitted a dissertation on François Rabelais to the Gorky Institute of World Literature to obtain a postgraduate title, a dissertation that could not be defended until the war ended.

## 16.3 Works and Ideas

### Toward a Philosophy of the Act

Toward a Philosophy of the Act was first published in the USSR in 1986 with the title *K filosofii postupka*. The manuscript, written between 1919-1921, was found in bad condition with pages missing and sections of text that were illegible. Consequently, this philosophical essay appears today as a fragment of an unfinished work. Toward a Philosophy of the Act comprises only an introduction, of which the first few pages are missing, and part one of the full text. However, Bakhtin's intentions for the work were not altogether lost, for he provided an outline in the introduction in which he stated that the essay was to contain four parts. The first part of the essay deals with the analysis of the performed acts or deeds that comprise the actual world; "the world actually experienced, and not the merely thinkable world." For the three subsequent and unfinished parts of Toward a Philosophy of the Act Bakhtin states the topics he intends to discuss. He outlines that the second part will deal with aesthetic activity and the ethics of artistic creation; the third with the ethics of politics; and the fourth with religion.

Toward a Philosophy of the Act reveals a young Bakhtin who is in the process of developing his moral philosophy by decentralizing the work of Kant. This text is one of Bakhtin's early works concerning ethics and aesthetics and it is here that Bakhtin lays out three claims regarding the acknowledgment of the uniqueness of one's participation in Being:

1. I both actively and passively participate in Being.
2. My uniqueness is given but it simultaneously exists only to the degree to which I actualize this uniqueness (in other words, it is in the performed act and deed that has yet to be achieved).
3. Because I am actual and irreplaceable I must actualize my uniqueness.

Bakhtin further states: "It is in relation to the whole actual unity that my unique thought arises from my unique place in Being." Bakhtin deals with the concept of morality whereby he attributes the predominating legalistic notion of morality to human moral action. According to Bakhtin, the I cannot maintain neutrality toward moral and ethical demands which manifest themselves as one's voice of consciousness.

It is here also that Bakhtin introduces an "architectonic" or schematic model of the human psyche which consists of three components: "I-for-myself", "I-for-the-other", and "other-for-me". The I-for-myself is an unreliable source of identity, and Bakhtin argues that it is the I-for-the-other through which human beings develop a sense of identity because it serves as an amalgamation of the way in which others view me. Conversely, other-for-me describes the way in which others incorporate my perceptions of them into their own identities. Identity, as Bakhtin describes it here, does not belong merely to the individual, rather it is shared by all.

### **Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics: Polyphony and Unfinalizability**

During his time in Leningrad, Bakhtin shifted his focus away from the philosophy characteristic of his early works and towards the notion of dialogue. It is at this time that he began his engagement with the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art* is considered to be Bakhtin's seminal work, and it is here that Bakhtin introduces three important concepts.

First, is the concept of the unfinalizable self: individual people cannot be finalized, completely understood, known, or labeled. Though it is possible to understand people and to treat them as if they are completely known, Bakhtin's conception of unfinalizability respects the possibility that a person can change, and that a person is never fully revealed or fully known in the world. Readers may find that this conception reflects the idea of the "soul"; Bakhtin had strong roots in Christianity and in the Neo-Kantian school led by Hermann Cohen, both of which emphasized the importance of an individual's potentially infinite capability, worth, and the hidden soul.

Second, is the idea of the relationship between the self and others, or other groups. According to Bakhtin, every person is influenced by others in an inescapably intertwined way, and consequently no voice can be said to be isolated. In an interview, Bakhtin once explained that,

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding-in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others.

As such, Bakhtin's philosophy greatly respected the influences of others on the self, not merely in terms of how a person comes to be, but also in how a person thinks and how a person sees him- or herself truthfully.

Third, Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky's work a true representation of "polyphony", that is, many voices. Each character in Dostoevsky's work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others. This idea of polyphony is related to the concepts of unfinalizability and self-and-others, since it is the unfinalizability of individuals that creates true polyphony.

Bakhtin briefly outlined the polyphonic concept of truth. He criticized the assumption that, if two people disagree, at least one of them must be in error. He challenged philosophers for whom plurality of minds is accidental and superfluous. For Bakhtin, truth is not a statement, a sentence

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or a phrase. Instead, truth is a number of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent, statements. Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by "a single mouth". The polyphonic truth requires many simultaneous voices. Bakhtin does not mean to say that many voices carry partial truths that complement each other. A number of different voices do not make the truth if simply "averaged" or "synthesized". It is the fact of mutual addressivity, of engagement, and of commitment to the context of a real-life event, that distinguishes truth from untruth.

When, in subsequent years, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art* was translated into English and published in the West, Bakhtin added a chapter on the concept of "carnival" and the book was published with the slightly different title, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. According to Bakhtin, carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together. The carnival creates the "threshold" situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible. The notion of a carnival was Bakhtin's way of describing Dostoevsky's polyphonic style: each individual character is strongly defined, and at the same time the reader witnesses the critical influence of each character upon the other. That is to say, the voices of others are heard by each individual, and each inescapably shapes the character of the other.

### **Rabelais and His World: Carnival and Grotesque**

During World War II Bakhtin submitted a dissertation on the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais which was not defended until some years later. The controversial ideas discussed within the work caused much disagreement, and it was consequently decided that Bakhtin be denied his doctorate. Thus, due to its content, *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* was not published until 1965, at which time it was given the title, *Rabelais and His World*.

A classic of Renaissance studies, in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin explores Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Bakhtin declares that, for centuries, Rabelais's book had been misunderstood, and claimed that *Rabelais and His World* clarified Rabelais's intentions. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin concerns himself with the openness of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; however, the book itself also serves as an example of such openness. Throughout the text, Bakhtin attempts two things: he seeks to recover sections of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that, in the past, were either ignored or suppressed, and conducts an analysis of the Renaissance social system in order to discover the balance between language that was permitted and language that was not. It is by means of this analysis that Bakhtin pinpoints two important subtexts: the first is carnival (carnavalesque) which Bakhtin describes as a social institution, and the second is grotesque realism which is defined as a literary mode. Thus, in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin studies the interaction between the social and the literary, as well as the meaning of the body and the material bodily lower stratum.

In his chapter on the history of laughter, Bakhtin advances the notion of its therapeutic and liberating force, arguing that in resisting hypocrisy "laughing truth... degraded power".

### **The Dialogic Imagination: Chronotope, Heteroglossia**

*The Dialogic Imagination* (first published as a whole in 1975) is a compilation of four essays concerning language and the novel: "Epic and Novel" (1941), "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", and "Discourse in the Novel". It is through the essays contained within *The Dialogic Imagination* that Bakhtin introduces the concepts of heteroglossia, dialogism and chronotope, making a significant contribution to the realm of literary scholarship. Bakhtin explains the generation of meaning through the "primacy of context over text" (heteroglossia), the hybrid nature of language (polyglossia) and the relation between utterances (intertextuality). Heteroglossia is "the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance." To make an utterance means to "appropriate the words of others



and populate them with one's own intention." Bakhtin's deep insights on dialogicality represent a substantive shift from views on the nature of language and knowledge by major thinkers as Ferdinand de Saussure and Immanuel Kant.

In "Epic and Novel", Bakhtin demonstrates the novel's distinct nature by contrasting it with the epic. By doing so, Bakhtin shows that the novel is well-suited to the post-industrial civilization in which we live because it flourishes on diversity. It is this same diversity that the epic attempts to eliminate from the world. According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is unique in that it is able to embrace, ingest, and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a novel. Other genres, however, cannot emulate the novel without damaging their own distinct identity.

"From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is a less traditional essay in which Bakhtin reveals how various different texts from the past have ultimately come together to form the modern novel.

"Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" introduces Bakhtin's concept of chronotope. This essay applies the concept in order to further demonstrate the distinctive quality of the novel. The word chronotope literally means "time space" and is defined by Bakhtin as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature." For the purpose of his writing, an author must create entire worlds and, in doing so, is forced to make use of the organizing categories of the real world in which he lives. For this reason chronotope is a concept that engages reality.

The final essay, "Discourse in the Novel", is one of Bakhtin's most complete statements concerning his philosophy of language. It is here that Bakhtin provides a model for a history of discourse and introduces the concept of heteroglossia. The term heteroglossia refers to the qualities of a language that are extralinguistic, but common to all languages. These include qualities such as perspective, evaluation, and ideological positioning. In this way most languages are incapable of neutrality, for every word is inextricably bound to the context in which it exists.

## **16.4 Speech Genres and Other Late Essays**

In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* Bakhtin moves away from the novel and concerns himself with the problems of method and the nature of culture. There are six essays that comprise this compilation: "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff", "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism", "The Problem of Speech Genres", "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis", "From Notes Made in 1970-71," and "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences."

"Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff" is a transcript of comments made by Bakhtin to a reporter from a monthly journal called *Novy Mir* that was widely read by Soviet intellectuals. The transcript expresses Bakhtin's opinion of literary scholarship whereby he highlights some of its shortcomings and makes suggestions for improvement.

"The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism" is a fragment from one of Bakhtin's lost books. The publishing house to which Bakhtin had submitted the full manuscript was blown up during the German invasion and Bakhtin was in possession of only the prospectus. However, due to a shortage of paper, Bakhtin began using this remaining section to roll cigarettes. So only a portion of the opening section remains. This remaining section deals primarily with Goethe.

"The Problem of Speech Genres" deals with the difference between Saussurean linguistics and language as a living dialogue (translinguistics). In a relatively short space, this essay takes up a topic about which Bakhtin had planned to write a book, making the essay a rather dense and complex read. It is here that Bakhtin distinguishes between literary and everyday language. According to Bakhtin, genres exist not merely in language, but rather in communication. In dealing with genres, Bakhtin indicates that they have been studied only within the realm of rhetoric and literature, but each discipline draws largely on genres that exist outside both rhetoric and

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literature. These extraliterary genres have remained largely unexplored. Bakhtin makes the distinction between primary genres and secondary genres, whereby primary genres legislate those words, phrases, and expressions that are acceptable in everyday life, and secondary genres are characterized by various types of text such as legal, scientific, etc.

"The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" is a compilation of the thoughts Bakhtin recorded in his notebooks. These notes focus mostly on the problems of the text, but various other sections of the paper discuss topics he has taken up elsewhere, such as speech genres, the status of the author, and the distinct nature of the human sciences. However, "The Problem of the Text" deals primarily with dialogue and the way in which a text relates to its context. Speakers, Bakhtin claims, shape an utterance according to three variables: the object of discourse, the immediate addressee, and a superaddressee. This is what Bakhtin describes as the tertiary nature of dialogue.

"From Notes Made in 1970-71" appears also as a collection of fragments extracted from notebooks Bakhtin kept during the years of 1970 and 1971. It is here that Bakhtin discusses interpretation and its endless possibilities. According to Bakhtin, humans have a habit of making narrow interpretations, but such limited interpretations only serve to weaken the richness of the past.

The final essay, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences", originates from notes Bakhtin wrote during the mid-seventies and is the last piece of writing Bakhtin produced before he died. In this essay he makes a distinction between dialectic and dialogics and comments on the difference between the text and the aesthetic object. It is here also, that Bakhtin differentiates himself from the Formalists, who, he felt, underestimated the importance of content while oversimplifying change, and the Structuralists, who too rigidly adhered to the concept of "code."

## Disputed Texts

Some of the works which bear the names of Bakhtin's close friends V. N. Vološinov and P. N. Medvedev have been attributed to Bakhtin - particularly *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* and *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*. These claims originated in the early 1970s and received their earliest full articulation in English in Clark and Holquist's 1984 biography of Bakhtin. In the years since then, however, most scholars have come to agree that Vološinov and Medvedev ought to be considered the true authors of these works. Although Bakhtin undoubtedly influenced these scholars and may even have had a hand in composing the works attributed to them, it now seems clear that if it was necessary to attribute authorship of these works to one person, Vološinov and Medvedev respectively should receive credit.

## Influence

He is known today for his interest in a wide variety of subjects, ideas, vocabularies, and periods, as well as his use of authorial disguises, and for his influence (alongside György Lukács) on the growth of Western scholarship on the novel as a premiere literary genre. As a result of the breadth of topics with which he dealt, Bakhtin has influenced such Western schools of theory as Neo-Marxism, Structuralism, and Semiotics. However, his influence on such groups has, somewhat paradoxically, resulted in narrowing the scope of Bakhtin's work. According to Clark and Holquist, rarely do those who incorporate Bakhtin's ideas into theories of their own appreciate his work in its entirety.

While Bakhtin is traditionally seen as a literary critic, there can be no denying his impact on the realm of rhetorical theory. Among his many theories and ideas Bakhtin indicates that style is a developmental process, occurring both within the user of language and language itself. His work instills in the reader an awareness of tone and expression that arises from the careful formation of verbal phrasing. By means of his writing, Bakhtin has enriched the experience of verbal and written expression which ultimately aids the formal teaching of writing. Some even suggest that Bakhtin introduces a new meaning to rhetoric because of his tendency to reject the separation of language and ideology.

## Self-Assessment

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### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Bakhtin began to be discovered by scholars in ..... .  
(a) 1963 (b) 1965  
(c) 1980 (d) 1971
- (ii) Bakhtin completed his studies in ..... .  
(a) 1915 (b) 1910  
(c) 1918 (d) None of these
- (iii) Bakhtin's *K. Filosofii Postupka* was published in ..... .  
(a) 1985 (b) 1986  
(c) 1990 (d) 2000
- (iv) *The Dialogic Imagination* was published in ..... .  
(a) 1975 (b) 1965  
(c) 1970 (d) 1985

## 16.5 Summary

- Although Bakhtin was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s.
- Bakhtin had a difficult life and career, and few of his works were published in an authoritative form during his lifetime. As a result, there is substantial disagreement over matters that are normally taken for granted: in which discipline he worked (was he a philosopher or literary critic?), how to periodize his work, and even which texts he wrote (see below). He is known for a series of concepts that have been used and adapted in a number of disciplines: dialogism, the carnivalesque, the chronotope, heteroglossia and "outsidedness" (the English translation of a Russian term *vnenakhodimost*, sometimes rendered into English from French rather than from Russian as "exotopy").
- Bakhtin's primary works include *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, an unfinished portion of a philosophical essay; *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art*, to which Bakhtin later added a chapter on the concept of carnival and published with the title *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*; *Rabelais and His World*, which explores the openness of the Rabelaisian novel; *The Dialogic Imagination*, whereby the four essays that comprise the work introduce the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope; and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, a collection of essays in which Bakhtin concerns himself with method and culture.
- Bakhtin completed his studies in 1918 and moved to a small city in western Russia, Nevel (Pskov Oblast), where he worked as a school teacher for two years. It was at this time that the first "Bakhtin Circle" formed. The group consisted of intellectuals with varying interests, but all shared a love for the discussion of literary, religious, and political topics. Included in this group were Valentin Voloshinov and, eventually, P. N. Medvedev, who joined the group later in Vitebsk. German philosophy was the topic talked about most frequently and, from this point forward, Bakhtin considered himself more a philosopher than a literary scholar. It was in Nevel, also, that Bakhtin worked tirelessly on a large work concerning moral philosophy that was never published in its entirety.
- In 1924, Bakhtin moved to Leningrad, where he assumed a position at the Historical Institute and provided consulting services for the State Publishing House. It is at this time that Bakhtin decided to share his work with the public, but just before "On the Question of the Methodology of Aesthetics in Written Works" was to be published, the journal in which it was to appear stopped publication. This work was eventually published 51 years later.

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- Bakhtin's works and ideas gained popularity after his death, and he endured difficult conditions for much of his professional life, a time in which information was often seen as dangerous and therefore often hidden. As a result, the details provided now are often of uncertain accuracy. Also contributing to the imprecision of these details is the limited access to Russian archival information during Bakhtin's life. It is only after the archives became public that scholars realized that much of what they thought they knew about the details of Bakhtin's life was false or skewed largely by Bakhtin himself.
- He is known today for his interest in a wide variety of subjects, ideas, vocabularies, and periods, as well as his use of authorial disguises, and for his influence (alongside György Lukács) on the growth of Western scholarship on the novel as a premiere literary genre. As a result of the breadth of topics with which he dealt, Bakhtin has influenced such Western schools of theory as Neo-Marxism, Structuralism, and Semiotics.
- While Bakhtin is traditionally seen as a literary critic, there can be no denying his impact on the realm of rhetorical theory. Among his many theories and ideas Bakhtin indicates that style is a developmental process, occurring both within the user of language and language itself. His work instills in the reader an awareness of tone and expression that arises from the careful formation of verbal phrasing.

### 16.6 Key-Words

1. Genre : A kind; a literary type or style. Poetry, drama, novel may be subdivided into lyric (including elegy, ode, song, sonnet, etc.) epic, tragedy, comedy, short story, biography, etc.

### 16.7 Review Questions

1. Discuss early life of Mikhail.
2. Explain works and ideas of Bakhtin.
3. What is the genre of Bakhtin? Explain.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (b)                      (iv) (a)

### 16.8 Further Readings



*Books*

1. Hutcheon, Linda *A poetics of postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, London: Longman, 1972.
4. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh (eds.) *A Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, London: Arnold, 1999.
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6. Seturaman, V.S. (ed.) *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008.

## Unit 17: Mikhail Bakhtin and his "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse"-Dialogics in Novels: Detailed Study

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Bakhtin's essay From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse.
- Explain the origin and nature of the novel.

### Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is a study on the history and construction of modern language in novels. Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is composed of three parts, each offering a different component to his study of novelistic discourse. The first part is an introduction to novelistic discourse; Bakhtin introduces the five stylistic approaches to novelistic discourse and differentiates the novel from other forms of writing. The penultimate section of the essay focuses ancient Greek literature and stories, specifically parody sonnets, and acknowledges its impact on the current discourse in novels. In addition, the second portion of the essay incorporates the idea of polyglossia-the coexistence of multiple languages in the same area-to illustrate the challenges of construction a common vernacular within literature. The final part of the essay references the Middle Ages, medieval texts, and works from the Bible to show the growth of novelistic discourse through time (in comparison to the Greek texts).

Bakhtin's incorporation of the history of the Bible in relation to the term "polyglossia" offered a careful approach to one of the most unifying texts in the world. Bakhtin calls the Bible "authoritative and sanctified", it is also widely read and interpreted by many across the world. However, the history of language and verbal discourse has the power to change meaning. While polyglossia complicated the novelistic discourse and how texts were read, the Bible remains the one text read and interpreted by many. Bakhtin also says that polyglossia contributed to debunking the myth of "straightforward genres", that it offers change and variety. Interestingly, when the Bible it is interpreted, it is for moral meaning; the conversion of language over time and the various meanings it implies doesn't hold precedence.

The word hybrid is used repetitively in the essay to describe a crossbreeding of ideas. In part three of the essay, both parody and satire are referenced as "intentional hybrids" in linguistic discourse. However, "satire" is said to be complex. While both imply irony and imitation, parody is a composition of satire. The marriage of languages to produce a comical style and influential discourse should be problematic. Crossing languages would cause confusion and misinterpretation, but instead it enhanced the history of novelistic discourse.



### **17.1 Mikhail Bakhtin's, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse"**

In Mikhail Bakhtin's essay, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," Bakhtin discusses the origin and nature of the novel arguing that "mere literary styles" are not enough to analyze and define the novel, and instead we should focus on the relationships between the distinct elements that distinguish the novel from other genres.

Bakhtin begins by briefly charting the course of the attempt to analyze and define the novel, and the resulting failure, because of the failure to explore the "stylistic specificum, of the novel as a genre." Bakhtin then provides a few examples of the use of imagery and metaphor within a novel, and how these elements differ from their use in poetics. Bakhtin points out a distinctive characteristic of the novel "the image of the another's language and outlook on the world..., simultaneously represented and representing, is extremely typical of the novel." Bakhtin then discusses the relationship between the stylistic elements an author uses in a novel as "connected to one another and with the author via their own characteristic dialogical relationships." Bakhtin posits that it is these relationships that define the sense of style of a novel, and of the genre as a whole. Another distinguishing characteristic of the language in the novel, as mentioned above, is that language not only represents something in the world, but also "serves as the object of representation."

In the next section of "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," Bakhtin discusses the idea of parody. Bakhtin spends a great deal of time going over the origin of parody and its varying roles, all to conclude that the novel allowed the author to examine language from "the point of view of a potentially different language and style." It is this "creating consciousness" that sets apart the novel from other genres. Parody within the novel is a parody about an object (like the use of parody in other genres) but this parody itself becomes an object. The final section of "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," is an exploration of the use of the quotation. Like the other elements that distinguish the novel, Bakhtin spends some time going over the origin and use of the quotation, ending in its use today in the novel. Through his discourse on quotation, Bakhtin determines that the quotation was one of the first elements responsible for parody. "Latin parody, is therefore, a bilingual phenomenon," concludes Bakhtin. Bakhtin ends by reminding the reader that we cannot examine the prehistory of the novelistic word with "mere literary styles."

Bakhtin's essay was tough to comprehend. The beginning of the essay had a much easier pace and clearer direction to read to, so that it was much more understandable. What I got lost in was the myriad examples Bakhtin employed to illustrate his point. More so than any other author we have read, Bakhtin relied upon the use of multiple and detailed examples to make his point. However, I did identify with Bakhtin's first discussion on the language of the novel. Here, Bakhtin was able to isolate what it is that distinguishes the novel from other genres, that is, its unique ability to represent an external object, but also be itself an object; the language of the novel both represents and is representing simultaneously. Bakhtin said, "Novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself," which strongly resonated for me with Paul de Man's theory on the resistance to theory. De Man concludes, that theory is resistance to itself in the same way that Bakhtin concludes that the language of the novel criticizes itself.

One of the weak points I found in Bakhtin's essay was during the beginning, when he made some very hasty premises to his argument, such as, the "Five different stylistic approaches to the novelistic discourse..." Another concept, which I couldn't fully grasp in Bakhtin's essay, was his concept of parody. Bakhtin spent page after page talking directly and indirectly about the nature and use of parody, even going into its early use in the Middle Age carnival. Even if I didn't understand, necessarily, Bakhtin's concept of parody, it did find it a fascinating subject to focus on. Rarely do these theoreticians focus on the notion of the comedy, specifically, and it was an interesting notion as to attribute it to the inception of the early novel. Bakhtin's last paragraph was an interesting shift from the rest of the novel. Separated by a space, the last paragraph concisely summed up Bakhtin's discourse on the prehistory of the novel, underscoring the importance of the history of the formation of the novel, beyond the interests of "mere literary styles." Staying true to his form, Bakhtin's last words included a number of examples.

Five different stylistic approaches to novelistic discourse may be observed:

1. the author's portions alone in the novel are analyzed, that is, only direct words of the author more or less correctly isolated - an analysis constructed in terms of the usual, direct poetic methods of representation and expression (metaphors, comparisons, lexical register, etc.);
2. instead of a stylistic analysis of the novel as an artistic whole, there is a neutral linguistic description of the novelist's language;
3. in a given novelist's language, elements characteristic of his particular literary tendency are isolated (be it Romanticism, Naturalism, Impressionism, etc.);
4. what is sought in the language of the novel is examined as an expression of the individual personality, that is, language is analyzed as the individual style of the given novelist;
5. the novel is viewed as a rhetorical genre, and its devices are analyzed from the point of view of their effectiveness as rhetoric.

All these types of stylistic analysis to a greater or lesser degree are remote from those peculiarities that define the novel as a genre, and they are also remote from the specific conditions under which the word lives in the novel. They all take a novelist's language and style not as the language and style of a novel but merely as the expression of a specific individual artistic personality, or as the style of a particular literary school or finally as a phenomenon common to poetic language in general. The individual artistic personality of the author, the literary school, the general characteristics of poetic language or of the literary language of a particular era all serve to conceal from us the genre itself, with the specific demands it makes upon language and the specific possibilities it opens up for it. As a result, in the majority of these works on the novel, relatively minor stylistic variations - whether individual or characteristic of a particular school - have the effect of completely covering up the major stylistic lines determined by the development of the novel as a unique genre. And all the while discourse in the novel has been living a life that is distinctly its own, a life that is impossible to understand from the point of view of stylistic categories formed on the basis of poetic genres in the narrow sense of that term. The differences between the novel (and certain forms close to it) and all other genres-poetic genres in the narrow sense—are so fundamental, so categorical, that all attempts to impose on the novel the concepts and norms of poetic imagery are doomed to fail. Although the novel does contain poetic imagery in the narrow sense (primarily in the author's direct discourse), it is of secondary importance for the novel. What is more, this direct imagery often acquires in the novel quite special functions that are not direct. Here, for example, is how Pushkin characterizes Lensky's poetry.

He sang love, he was obedient to love, And his song was as clear As the thoughts of a simple maid, As an infant's dream, as the moon[...]. (a development of the final comparison follows). The poetic images (specifically the metaphoric comparisons) representing Lensky's 'song' do not here have any direct poetic significance at all. They cannot be understood as the direct poetic images of Pushkin himself (although formally, of course, the characterization is that of the author). Here Lensky's 'song' is characterizing itself, in its own language, in its own poetic manner. Pushkin's direct characterization of Lensky's 'song' - which we find as well in the novel - sounds completely different: Thus he wrote gloomily and languidly[...]. In the four lines cited by us above it is Lensky's song itself, his voice, his poetic style that sounds, but it is permeated with the parodic and ironic accents of the author; that is the reason why it need not be distinguished from authorial speech by compositional or grammatical means. What we have before us is in fact an image of Lensky's song, but not an image in the narrow sense; it is rather a novelistic image: the image of another's language, in the given instance the image of another's poetic style (sentimental and romantic). The poetic metaphors in these lines ('as an infant's dream', 'as the moon' and others) no way function here as the primary means of representation (as they would function in a direct, 'serious' song written by Lensky himself); rather they themselves have here become the object of representation, or more precisely of a representation that is parodied and stylized. This novelistic image of another's style (with the direct metaphors that it incorporates) must be taken in intonational quotation marks within the system of direct authorial speech (postulated by us here), that is, taken as if the image were parodic and ironic. Were we to discard intonational question marks and take

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the use of metaphors here as the direct means by which the author represents himself, we would in so doing destroy the novelistic image [obraz] of another's style, that is, destroy precisely that image that Pushkin, as novelist, constructs here. Lensky's represented poetic speech is very distant from the direct word of the author himself as we have postulated it: Lensky's language functions merely as an object of representation (almost as a material thing); the author himself is almost completely outside Lensky's language (it is only his parodic and ironic accents that penetrate this 'language of another').[...] The image of another's language and outlook on the world, simultaneously represented and representing, is extremely typical of the novel; the greatest novelistic images (for example, the figure of Don Quixote) belong precisely to this type. These descriptive and expressive means that are direct and poetic (in the narrow sense) retain their direct significance when they are incorporated into such a figure, but at the same time they are 'qualified' and 'externalized', shown as something historically. These lines and the following citations from Eugene Onegin are taken from Walter Arndt's translation (New York: Dutton, 1963), slightly modified in places to correspond with Bakhtin's remarks about particular words used. (Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, first published in Russia in 1831, is 'a novel in verse'. The fact that it is written in verse does not, however, make it a poem rather than a novel in Bakhtin's terms.) relative, delimited and incomplete - in the novel they, so to speak, criticize themselves.[...] The author represents this language, carries on a conversation with it, and the conversation penetrates into the interior of this language-image and dialogizes it from within. And all essential novelistic images share this quality: they are internally dialogized images - of the languages, styles, world views of another (all of which are inseparable from their concrete linguistic and stylistic embodiment). The reigning theories of poetic imagery are completely powerless to analyze these complex internally dialogized images of whole languages. [...] The stylistic structure of Evgenij Onegin is typical of all authentic novels. To a greater or lesser extent, every novel is a dialogized system made up of the images of 'languages', styles and consciousnesses that are concrete and inseparable from language. Language in the novel not only represents, but itself serves as the object of representation. Novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself. In this consists the categorical distinction between the novel and all straight-forward genres - the epic poem, the lyric and the drama (strictly conceived). All directly descriptive and expressive means at the disposal of these genres, as well as the genres themselves, become upon entering the novel an object of representation within it. Under conditions of the novel every direct word - epic, lyric, strictly dramatic - is to a greater or lesser degree made into an object, the word itself becomes a bounded [ogranicennij] image, one that quite often appears ridiculous in this framed condition. The basic tasks for a stylistics in the novel are, therefore: the study of specific images of languages and styles; the organization of these images; their typology (for they are extremely diverse); the combination of images of languages within then ovelistic whole; the transfers and switchings of languages and voices; their dialogical interrelationships. The stylistics of direct genres, of the direct poetic word, offer us almost no help in resolving these problems. We speak of a special novelistic discourse because it is only in the novel that discourse can reveal all its specific potential and achieve its true depth. But the novelis comparatively recent genre. Indirect discourse, however, the representation of another's word, another's language in intonational quotation marks, was known in the most ancient times; we encounter it in the earliest stages of verbal culture. What is more, long before the appearance of the novel we find a rich world of diverse forms that transmit, mimic and represent from various vantage points another's word, another's speech and language, including also the languages of the direct genres. These diverse forms prepared the ground for the novel long before its actual appearance. Novelistic discourse has a lengthy prehistory, going back centuries, even thousands of years. It was formed and matured in the genres of familiar speech found in conversational folk language (genres that are as yet little studied) and also in certain folkloric and low literary genres. During its germination and early development, the novelistic word reflected a primordial struggle between tribes, peoples, cultures and languages - it is still full of echoes of this ancient struggle. In essence this discourse always developed on the boundary line between cultures and languages. The prehistory of novelistic discourse is of great interest and not without its own special drama. In the prehistory of novelistic discourse one may observe many extremely heterogeneous facts at work. From our point of view, however, two of these factors prove to be of decisive importance: on of these is laughter, the other

polyglossia. The most ancient forms for representing language were organized by laughter - these were originally nothing more than the ridiculing of another's language and another's direct discourse. Polyglossia and the inter animation of languages associated with it elevated these forms to a new artistic and ideological level, which made possible the genre of the novel. These two factors in the prehistory of novelistic discourse are the subject of the present article.

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One of the most ancient and widespread forms for representing the direct word of another is parody. What is distinctive about parody as a form? Take, for example, the parodic sonnets with which Don Quixote begins. Although they are impeccably structured as sonnets, we could never possibly assign them to the sonnet genre. In Don Quixote they appear as part of a novel - but even the isolated parodic sonnet (outside the novel) could not be classified generically as a sonnet. In a parodied sonnet, the sonnet form is not a genre at all; that is, it is not the form of a whole but is rather the object of representation: the sonnet here is the hero of the parody. In a parody on the sonnet, we must first of all recognize a sonnet, recognize its form, its specific style, its manner of seeing, its manner of selecting from and evaluating the world - the world view of the sonnet, as it were. A parody may represent and ridicule these distinctive features of the sonnet well or badly, profoundly or superficially. But in any case, what results is not a sonnet, but rather the image of a sonnet.

For the same reasons one could not under any circumstances assign to the genres of 'epic poem' the parodic epic 'War between the Mice and the Frogs' This is an image of the Homeric style. It is precisely style that is the true hero of the work. We would have to say the same of Scarron's Virgil travesti. One could likewise not include the fifteenth-century sermons joyeux, in the genre of the sermon, or parodic 'Pater noster' or 'Ave Marias' in the genre of the prayer and so forth. All these parodies on genres and generic styles ('languages') enter the great and diverse world of verbal forms that ridicule the straightforward, serious word in all its generic guises. This world is very rich, considerably richer than we are accustomed to believe. The nature and methods available for ridiculing something are highly varied, and not exhausted by parodying and travesty in a strict sense. These methods for making fun of the straightforward word have as yet received little scholarly attention. Our general conceptions of parody and travesty in literature were formed as a scholarly discipline solely by studying very late forms of literary parody, forms of the type represented by Scarron's *Enéide travestie*, or Platen's 'Verhängnisvolle Gabel' that is, the impoverished and limited conceptions of the nature of the parodying and travesty word were then retroactively applied to the supremely rich and varied world of parody and travesty in previous ages. The importance of parodic-travesty forms in world literature is enormous. Several examples follow that bear witness to their wealth and special significance. Let us first take up the ancient period. The 'literature of erudition' of late antiquity - Aulus Gellius, Plutarch (in his *Moralia*), Macrobius and, in particular, Athenaeus - provide sufficiently rich data for judging the scope and special character of the parodying and travesty literature of ancient times. The commentaries, citations, references and allusions made by these 'erudites' add substantially to the fragmented and random material on the ancient world's literature of laughter that has survived. The works of such literary scholars as Dietrich, Reich, Cornford and others have prepared us for more correct assessment of the role and significance of parodic-travesty forms in the verbal culture of ancient times. It is our conviction that there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse - artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday - that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*. What is more, these parodic doubles and laughing reflections of the direct word were, in some cases, just as sanctioned by tradition and just as canonized as their elevated models. I will deal only very briefly with the problem of the so-called 'fourth drama', that is, the satyr play. In most instances this drama, which follows upon the tragic trilogy, developed the same narrative and mythological motifs as had the trilogy that preceded it. It was, therefore, a peculiar type of parodic-travesty *contre-partie* to the myth that had just received a tragic treatment on the stage; it showed the myth in a different aspect. These parodic-travesty counter-presentations of lofty national myths were just as sanctioned and canonical as their straightforward tragic manifestations. All the tragedians-



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Phrynicus, Sophocles, Euripides - were writers of satyr plays as well, and Aeschylus, the most serious and pious of them all, an initiate into the highest Eleusinian Mysteries, was considered by the Greeks to be the greatest master of the satyr play. From fragments of Aeschylus' satyr play.

The Bone-Gatherers' we see that this drama gave a parodic, travesty picture of the events and heroes of the Trojan War, and particularly the episode involving Odysseus' quarrel with Achilles and Diomedes, where a stinking chamber pot is thrown at Odysseus' head. It should be added that the figure of 'comic Odysseus', a parodic travesty of his high epic and tragic image, was one of the most popular figures of satyr plays, of ancient Doric farce and pre-Aristophanic comedy, as well as of a whole series of minor comic pieces, parodic speeches and disputes in which the comedy of ancient times was so rich (especially in southern Italy and Sicily). Characteristic here is that special role that the motif of madness played in the figure of 'comic Odysseus': Odysseus, as is well known, donned a clown's fool's cap (pileus) and harnessed his horse and ox to plow, pretending to be mad in order to avoid participation in the war. It was the motif of madness that switched the figure of Odysseus from the high and straight forward plane to the comic plane of parody and travesty.

But the most popular figure of the satyr play and other forms of the parodic travesty was the figure of the 'comic Hercules'. Hercules, the powerful and simple servant to the cowardly, weak and false king Euristheus; Hercules, who had conquered death in battle and had descended into the nether world; Hercules the monstrous glutton, the playboy, the drunk and scrapper, but especially Hercules the madman - such were the motifs that lent a comic aspect to his image. In this comic aspect, heroism and strength are retained, but they are combined with laughter and with images from the material life of the body. The figure of the comic Hercules was extremely popular, not only in Greece but also in Rome, and later in Byzantium (where it became one of the central figures in the marionette theatre). Until quite recently this figure lived on in the Turkish game of 'shadow puppets'. The comic Hercules is one of the most profound folk images for cheerful and simple heroism, and had an enormous influence on all of world literature. When taken together with such figures as the 'comic Odysseus' and the 'comic Hercules', the 'fourth drama', which was an indispensable conclusion to the tragic trilogy, indicates that the literary consciousness of the Greeks did not view the parodic-travesty reworkings of national myth as any particular profanation or blasphemy. It is characteristic that the Greeks were not at all embarrassed to attribute the authorship of the parodic work 'War between the Mice and the Frogs' to Homer himself. Homer is also credited with a comic work (a long poem) about the fool Margit. For any and every straight forward genre, any and every direct discourse - epic, tragic, lyric, philosophical - may and indeed must itself become the object of representation, the object of a parodic travesty 'mimicry'. It is as if such mimicry rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two, shows that a given straight forward generic word - epic or tragic - is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object; the process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or a given style. Parodic-travesty literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fitted into a high and straight forward genre. The high genres are monotonic, while the 'fourth drama' and genres akin to it retain the ancient binary tone of the word. Ancient parody was free of any nihilistic denial. It was not, after all, the heroes who were parodied, nor the Trojan War and its participants; what was parodied was only its epic heroization; not Hercules and its exploits but their tragic heroization. The genre itself, the style, the language are all put in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks, and they are perceived against a backdrop of a contradictory reality that cannot be confined within their narrow frames. The direct and serious word was revealed, in all its limitations and insufficiency, only after it had become the laughing image of that word - but it was by no means discredited in the process. Thus it did not bother the Greeks to think that Homer himself wrote a parody of Homeric style. [...] These parodic-travesty forms prepared the ground for the novel in one very important, in fact decisive, respect. They liberated the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net; they destroyed the homogenizing power of myth over language; they



freed consciousness from the power of the direct word, destroyed the thick walls that had imprisoned consciousness within its own discourse, within its own language. A distance arose between language and reality that was to prove an indispensable condition for authentically realistic forms of discourse. Linguistic consciousness - parodying the direct word, direct style, exploring its limits, its absurd sides, the face specific to an era - constituted itself outside this direct word and outside all its graphic and expressive means of representation. A new mode developed for working creatively with language: the creating artist began to look at language from the outside, with another's eyes, from the point of view of a potentially different language and style. It is, after all, precisely in the light of another potential language or style that a given straight forward style is parodied, travestied, ridiculed. The creating consciousness stands, as it were, on the boundary line between languages and styles. This is, for the creating consciousness, a highly peculiar position to find itself in with regard to language. The aedile or rhapsode experienced himself in his own language, in his own discourse, in an utterly different way from the creator of 'War between the Mice and the Frogs', or the creators of Margites.

One who creates a direct word - whether epic, tragic or lyric - deals only with the subject whose praises he sings, or represents, or expresses, and he does so in his own language that is perceived as the sole and fully adequate tool for realizing the word's direct, objectivized meaning. [...] In his book on Plato, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff writes: 'Only knowledge of a language that possesses another mode of conceiving the world can lead to the appropriate knowledge of one's own language[...].'

I do not continue the quotation, for it primarily concerns the problem of understanding one's own language in purely cognitive linguistic terms, an understanding that is realized only in the light of a different language, one not one's own; but this situation is no less pervasive where the literary imagination is conceiving language in actual artistic practice. Moreover, in the process of literary creation, languages interanimate each other and objectify precisely that side of one's own (and of the other's) language that pertains to its world view, its inner form, the axiologically accentuated system inherent in it. For the creating literary consciousness, existing in a field illuminated by another's language, it is not the phonetic system of its own language that stands out, nor is it the distinctive features of its own morphology nor its own abstract lexicon - what stands out is precisely that which makes language concrete and which makes its world view ultimately untranslatable, that is, precisely the style of the languages as a totality. [...] Closely connected with the problem of polyglossia and inseparable from it is the problem of heteroglossia within a language, that is, the problem of internal differentiation, the stratification characteristic of any national language. This problem is of primary importance for understanding the style and historical destinies of the modern European novel, that is, the novel since the seventeenth century. This latecomer reflects, in its stylistic structure, the struggle between two tendencies in the languages of European peoples: one a centralizing (unifying) tendency, the other a decentralizing tendency (that is, one that stratifies languages). The novel senses itself on the border between the completed, dominant literary language and the extra literary languages that know heteroglossia; the novel either serves to further the centralizing tendencies of a new literary language in the process of taking shape (with its grammatical, stylistic and ideological norms), or - on the contrary - the novel fights for the renovation of an antiquated literary language, in the interests of those strata of the national language that have remained (to a greater or lesser degree) outside the centralizing and unifying influence of the artistic and ideological norm established by the dominant literary language. The literary-artistic consciousness of the modern novel, sensing itself on the border between two languages, one literary, the other extra literary, each of which now knows heteroglossia, also senses itself on the border of time: it is extraordinarily sensitive to time in language, it senses time's shifts, the aging and renewing of language, the past and the future - and all in language. [...In the later period of the mainstream Russian formalists' activity, another school of criticism, led by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), shared some of their concerns, at the same time attempting to reconcile formalism with a socio-historical approach. Bakhtin's writings aroused less interest in his active years than they were to receive later on when the time of formalism was long overdue. His stature has risen highest in critical milieus especially in the last 3-4 decades, that is since his

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studies were published (some of them for the first time) in Soviet Russia and were translated in the main Western languages. It is hard to assess whether his spectacular late career is due in the first place to the innovatory nature of his concepts and critical analyses or to his sensational biography that came to be known to the public as late as the 1960s. Indeed, there were quite a few spicy detective story ingredients attached to it: a bone disease in his youth which led to the amputation of one leg, his internment in a Soviet death camp in the 1930s - a sentence that was then commuted to internal exile, his de facto disappearance from public life for several decades (which may have saved his life during the Stalin years), the discovery by the literary students in the late fifties that the author of the reputable book on Dostoevsky was not dead and lived somewhere in the provinces, his low profile to the very end despite the growing popularity his studies were enjoying.

Bakhtin did not belong to either of the formalist circles in Soviet Russia, but was claimed by some of their members, including Jakobson, to be in their ranks. In actual fact what his studies do share with formalism is the attempt to define the specific devices which articulate a literary genre as different from others. Also he was interested in the literary structure per se, analyzing its dynamic function within the historical traditions, particularly its subversive roles. Yet, his field of inquiry extends well beyond the formalist concerns, as he researched not only the literary language, but also other socio-ideological forms of expression, such as the carnivalesque one. The sweeping cultural preoccupations of this literary theorist and philosopher of language explain why he was described in turns as a formalist, Marxist, phenomenologist, proto-deconstructionist, or even as an orthodox Christian militant by some Slavists.



*Did u know?* Bakhtin was the first and foremost theorist of one genre, the novel, which he contrasted with poetry (as in music polyphonic compositions differ from monophonic ones).

Bakhtin could not have been a Marxist proper, although here and there he criticized the formalists for neglecting the sociological factors. His main principles and concepts surpass by far the reductionist determinism of classical Marxist tenets. However, he associated himself with two avowed Marxists, Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev, and the paternity of several orthodox Marxist articles is hotly disputed even today by commentators between the three authors: one of these studies is a sharp attack against the Formalist School (the 1928 book *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, written either by Medvedev or by Bakhtin), which may have contributed to the definitive banning of the movement.

Out of Bakhtin's plentiful and seminal contributions to the philosophy of language and of culture as well as to literary theory we will focus our attention, within the framework of our study, on his insights which are more closely connected with the formalist issues, such as the dialogic mode and the uses of language in prose writings, particularly in the novel .

In the first phase of his career Bakhtin's interests were mainly retained by the complex relationships between ethics and aesthetics, between self and other: he propounded a "philosophy of the act" which relied on Kantian categories. His studies written in the second phase of his activity (about 1924-1930) are hallmarked by the discovery of the dialogic potential of the word and the "polyphonic" mode of writing. His cornerst one study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, came out in 1929.

In the following two decades, despite the obstacles which life in an entirely ideologized country set before an independent intellectual like Bakhtin, he produced the most substantial concepts for a "prosaic" description of the novel, such as novelistic consciousness and the chronotope. "Discourse in the Novel", "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", and "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" were written in that period. The Chronotope is Bakhtin's term for the specific sense of space and time (in other words the social and the historical components) which characterizes every genre, according to its specific ideology. If in the ancient works the social

element played a background role, in the novel it has a direct, molding impact upon the characters: they and the society influence and change each other as it happens in actual history, and this accounts for Bakhtin's interest in the dialogic consciousness of the novel.

Another direction of investigation which he pursued in the 1930s belongs to the sociology of culture: in *Rabelais and His World*, a book which could be published only in 1965, Bakhtin celebrated the "joyously ambivalent carnivalesque" mood in Rabelais's writings, indirectly referring to the life conditions and the constraints in an authoritarian state: this form of social manifestation, having its own norms and rituals, subverts the official ideology, overturns the established hierarchies, mixes up the opposites and provides an escape valve for discontent. Upon literary genres, such as the novel, the carnivalesque mood, with its insistence on body and bodily functions, has a molding effect, resulting in a parodic or grotesque style. Owing to his emphasis on the socially liberating role of laughter and the carnivalesque forms of manifestation, typical of low culture, Bakhtin is claimed today by the advocates of "cultural studies" as one of their predecessors.

In the last two decades of his life, the Russian scholar revised and added some earlier studies, and returned to the broader philosophical themes of his early writings, extending his concerns to the humanities and the interpretation theory in general.

Critics have identified three overall concepts which subsume Bakhtin's theoretical findings. The first one is *Prosaics*, as opposed to *poetics*: the term, coined by his commentators, describes his mistrust of "theoretism" (i.e. the belief that everything can be explained through wide-ranging systems, such as Saussureanism, Freudianism, Marxism, formalism), the importance he attaches to small, "prosaic" facts of life instead of the dramatic, catastrophic events, and as concerns the novelistic genre, the emphasis he lays on its complexities: the novel cannot be analyzed with reference to tropes, like poetry, but insisting on its dialogic nature. Dialogue, the second global term, refers to the fact that authentic consciousness can be revealed only by presenting the interaction of at least two voices: truth resides in conversation rather than in a set of sentences. The third basic concept in Bakhtin's thought is *Unfinalizability*. In dialogic prose the world appropriately appears as an unfinalizable, open, creative space; in his Dostoevsky study Bakhtin states that /nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.

With Bakhtin, not only is the literary work open (Umberto Eco's *opera aperta*), or writerly, but the world it creates is never to be finished.

The most seminal finding of Bakhtin's research as concerns the novel is its polyphonic (or dialogic) nature. In order to understand the meaning in which the Russian scholar used these terms, it is yet necessary to dwell first on the related concept of *Heteroglossia* (*Reznorechie*). The term "heteroglossia" belongs to linguistic theory, just as "polyphony" does to fictional studies. It is meant to reveal the way in which meaning is produced by discourse through the use of a "social diversity of speech types", as Bakhtin observes in his renowned 1935 essay "Discourse in the Novel". There are numberless discursive strata in every language, such as social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, .... languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour, for, says Bakhtin, each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphasis.

It is even possible to speak of a family jargon, with its special vocabulary and its unique accentual system, as in the case of the *Irtnevs*, in Tolstoy. At any moment in history, language is heteroglot from top to bottom. Bakhtin's dynamic perspective on language can be described as *in vivo*, a Romanian scholar has observed, in contradistinction to the *in vitro* view of the formalists.

In "Discourse..." Bakhtin claims that some of the best instances of heteroglossia at work can be found in the English comic novel, where there is a "re-processing of almost all the levels of literary

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language, both conversational and written, that were current at the time", from parliamentary eloquence, to the language of the speculators' dealings. For instance, in one of the excerpts he supplies from Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, "the speech of another" (in a highly ceremonious tone) is inserted for the sake of parody into the author's discourse, in a concealed form, that is without any formal markers such as quotation marks. Bakhtin observes that this is not a mere case of another's speech in the same language, but "another's utterance in a language that is itself 'other' to the author".

He commends mostly those writers and literary forms which exemplify heteroglossia, that is a "Galilean" language consciousness: Dostoevsky as compared with Tolstoy, the novel versus poetry. After a long tradition of prose writings of a monologic type (revealing a "Ptolemaic" consciousness), such as the Greek and chivalric romance, the pastoral, the sentimental novel, heteroglossia, with its subversive and liberating potential, began to be foregrounded in prose with Rabelais and Cervantes, reaching a climax in Dostoevsky's novels.

Although the Russian theorist did comment on the place of heteroglossia in the novelistic genre, the proper term that describes the dialogic nature of the novel is Polyphony (a concept derived from music) or Dialogism as such. Actually heteroglossia is a linguistic reality, whereas polyphony is just a possible (and desirable) fictional mode, to be contrasted with the monologic one. The first detailed references to novelistic polyphony appeared in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; yet Bakhtin reformulated the concept several times in his studies.

Polyphonic novels, such as Dostoevsky's, make up a new novelistic genre, according to the Russian theorist's initial views. In this kind of fiction the reader hears several contesting voices, which are not subject to an attempt at unification on the author's part: these voices are engaged in a dialogue in which no point of view is privileged, no final word is heard. The author stands on the same level as his heroes, relinquishing his "surplus of vision". He knows nothing more than they do and may be surprised by their words at any point:

Dostoevsky brings into being not voiceless slaves ... but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him, states Bakhtin. Conversely, in monologic novels, such as Tolstoy's, the general perspective is solely the author's one, and the characters' points of view are orchestrated in accordance with his positions. (We can notice that there is a slight resemblance between Tomashevsky's concept of *skaz* in the narrative, and Bakhtin's polyphony.)

In the polyphonic, non-Aristotelian plot, despite the plurality of independent and unmerged consciousnesses, the unity of "the given event" is preserved, but this is a dialogic unity, based on the coexistence of spiritual diversity. The dialogic process is basically unfinalizable, unlike the closed product of the monologic whole: each thought of Dostoevsky's heroes looks like a rejoinder in a never-ending tense debate.

One particular aspect of polyphony is Double - Voicing - a case when in a single utterance two voices are meant to be heard as interacting: the words should be understood as if they were spoken with quotation marks. This mode of speaking reflects the fact that, according to Bakhtin, the language of communication is never free from the intentions of the other people socially involved in an event. Single-voiced verbal constructions can be found only in professional discourse, not in rhetorical or fictional language. In the cases of passive double-voicing the two voices may seem to be in agreement or in disagreement (as in parodic speech); when resistance or tension between them appear, the double-voicing is active: such is the status of the "word with a loophole", in which there is included a statement, its rebuttal, the response to the rebuttal, and so on, possibly ad infinitum.

Embedding is a specific type of double-voicing form, in which the hero's perspective on himself is infiltrated by "someone else's words about him". Bakhtin illustrates this with a scene from Dostoevsky's novel, *Poor People*, in which the protagonist is writing a letter to a woman, confessing

he lives in a kitchen; his "sideward glance" and his recoiling as he thinks about her negative reaction to this embarrassing news are easy to imagine: his discourse is penetrated by the words of another and therefore it becomes distorted.

If in Problems... Bakhtin claimed that Dostoevsky was the creator of the polyphonic novel, later on he slightly altered his views, stating that dialogism is more or less present in all novels, especially in those imbued with a carnivalesque mood. Thus in "Discourse...", he defined the novel as "a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized". There is polyphony even in some non-fictional prose, such as the early Platonic dialogues where Socrates appears not so much as the teacher, the owner of truth, but rather as a kind of grotesque midwife, one who incites to dialogue in order to search for truth. Or in satires such as the Menippean ones, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, and so forth.

In its general sense, then, polyphony is not only a technical characteristic of the novel (related, yet not restricted to, the notion of dramaticism), but also a principle of the creative process and of moral philosophy, owing to its implications of unfinalizability.

The Bakhtinian concept has made a significant career in the last decades. Contemporary critics have used the term mainly to refer to the modernist and postmodern fiction (Julia Kristeva, for instance), but others (such as David Lodge) have rightfully argued that polyphonic elements can also be found in realistic prose. Some feminists have appropriated it in reference to *l'écriture féminine*, and connections between the notion of dialogic speech and psychoanalytical or deconstructive approaches have also been established. Some even claim to discern a particular critical approach of late, Dialogical Criticism, inspired by such concerns of Bakhtin's as the polyphonic heterogeneity of the discourse, and the function of subversive, carnivalesque elements in prose narratives. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, has made use of these concepts in *La conquête de l'Amérique* (1982), a study of the dialogue between the European, colonizing voices and the Indians' colonized ones.

## Self-Assessment

### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) The final part of the essay references the ..... .
- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| (a) ancient ages | (b) middle ages   |
| (c) modern ages  | (d) none of these |
- (ii) Parody is a composition of ..... .
- |            |                   |
|------------|-------------------|
| (a) irony  | (b) metaphor      |
| (c) satire | (d) none of these |
- (iii) "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" Bakhtin discusses the idea of ..... .
- |            |                   |
|------------|-------------------|
| (a) satire | (b) metaphor      |
| (c) parody | (d) none of these |
- (iv) The Greeks were not at all embarrassed to attribute the authorship of the parodic work war between the ..... .
- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| (a) mice and the frogs | (b) mice and the dogs |
| (c) cats and the rats  | (d) none of these.    |

## 17.2 Summary

- Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is composed of three parts, each offering a different component to his study of novelistic discourse. The first part is an introduction to novelistic discourse; Bakhtin introduces the five stylistic approaches to novelistic discourse and differentiates the novel from other forms of writing.



## Notes

- Bakhtin discusses the origin and nature of the novel arguing that "mere literary styles" are not enough to analyze and define the novel, and instead we should focus on the relationships between the distinct elements that distinguish the novel from other genres.
- Bakhtin begins by briefly charting the course of the attempt to analyze and define the novel, and the resulting failure, because of the failure to explore the "stylistic specificum, of the novel as a genre." Bakhtin then provides a few examples of the use of imagery and metaphor within a novel, and how these elements differ from their use in poetics. Bakhtin points out a distinctive characteristic of the novel "the image of the another's language and outlook on the world..., simultaneously represented and representing, is extremely typical of the novel."
- In the next section of "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," Bakhtin discusses the idea of parody. Bakhtin spends a great deal of time going over the origin of parody and its varying roles, all to conclude that the novel allowed the author to examine language from "the point of view of a potentially different language and style."
- Bakhtin's essay was tough to comprehend. The beginning of the essay had a much easier pace and clearer direction to read to, so that it was much more understandable. What I got lost in was the myriad examples Bakhtin employed to illustrate his point. More so than any other author we have read, Bakhtin relied upon the use of multiple and detailed examples to make his point. However, I did identify with Bakhtin's first discussion on the language of the novel. Here, Bakhtin was able to isolate what it is that distinguishes the novel from other genres, that is, its unique ability to represent an external object, but also be itself an object; the language of the novel both represents and is representing simultaneously.
- Bakhtin did not belong to either of the formalist circles in Soviet Russia, but was claimed by some of their members, including Jakobson, to be in their ranks. In actual fact what his studies do share with formalism is the attempt to define the specific devices which articulate a literary genre as different from others. Also he was interested in the literary structure per se, analyzing its dynamic function within the historical traditions, particularly its subversive roles.
- Bakhtin could not have been a Marxist proper, although here and there he criticized the formalists for neglecting the sociological factors. His main principles and concepts surpass by far the reductionist determinism of classical Marxist tenets.
- In "Discourse..." Bakhtin claims that some of the best instances of heteroglossia at work can be found in the English comic novel, where there is a "re-processing of almost all the levels of literary language, both conversational and written, that were current at the time", from parliamentary eloquence, to the language of the speculators' dealings. For instance, in one of the excerpts he supplies from Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, "the speech of another".
- The Bakhtinian concept has made a significant career in the last decades. Contemporary critics have used the term mainly to refer to the modernist and postmodern fiction (Julia Kristeva, for instance), but others (such as David Lodge) have rightfully argued that polyphonic elements can also be found in realistic prose. Some feminists have appropriated it in reference to *l'écriture féminine*, and connections between the notion of dialogic speech and psychoanalytical or deconstructive approaches have also been established.

### 17.3 Key-Words

1. Heteroglossia : (Gk. 'other/different tongues') term used by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the variety of voices or languages within a novel, but can be used of any text to give the sense that language use does not come from one origin but is multiple and diverse, a mixing of heterogeneous discourses, sociolects, etc.

2. Implied reader : Wolfgang Iser uses this term to denote a hypothetical reader towards whom the text is directed. The implied reader is to be distinguished from the so-called 'real reader'.

Notes

## 17.4 Review Questions

1. What were Bakhtin's main concerns regarding Language? How does he treat language?
2. Discuss the origin and nature of the Bhaktin Essay.
3. What are the five different stylist approaches to Novelistic Discourse? Discuss.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (b)                    (ii) (c)                    (iii) (c)                    (iv) (a)

## 17.5 Further Readings



Books

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## Unit 18: Mikhail Bakhtin and his 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse (Textual Analysis with Chronotopes and Perennial Narrativity)

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Bakhtin's 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse'.
- Understand the Concept of Chronotopes.

### Introduction

Mikhail (pronounced Mikahil) Bakhtin was a Russian genre critic whose theories were not just influential but also threctly related to literature. His genre, of course, was the novel and he looked at the novel in, well, novel ways.

Bakhtin was concerned with language or discourse as a social activity. The Bakhtin School comprising Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Volosphinov believed 'words' to be active, dynamic, that had several connotations and would mean something different to a different person or social hierarchy or whose meaning would differ according to time and place. Earlier linguist patronised the view that language was 'isolated ... divorced from its verbal and actual contest'. The Bakhtin School used the Russian word 'solvo' which can and is translated into English as 'word', but the Russian connotation extends a social flavour that would more readily imply utterance 'or even' discourse.

Bakhtin looked upon language as an instrument and an area of class struggle. Hitherto revolutions (for example, the French Revolution of 1789), could not be visualized without bloodshed. With Bakhtin came a new theory, verbal signal or words as instruments of revolution. Where does this become apparent? It becomes apparent when various class interests come into conflict with each other on language grounds.

Bakhtin considered the novel to be such a dynamic genere that would eventually take over, many other genres. For instance, Epic, which was characterized (according to Bakhtin) by an uncrossable gulf separating the characters and events from the audience was eventually subsumed by the novel, in such a way that a separation would be unthinkable. Such an understanding would explain ancient writers like Euripides (480-406 BC), who wrote about Epic characters in a novelized

maner. It could also be used to explain newer genres, such as Magic Realism, which seems to demonstrate a blending of the novel with the fairy tale. Accordingly, while we might object to Bakhtin's theories by pointing out poets such as Walt Whitman (1819–1921) who are very clearly using heteroglossia, Bakhtin would answer that *Songs of Myself* is simply a novelized poem, or even a novel in verse form.

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## 18.1 Bakhtin's Concept of Chronotopes

Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope concept offers for the study of the intrinsically hybrid genre of the historical novel. By applying the concept to the analysis of the early 19th century Flemish historical novel, I illustrate how the chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal, which structures a significant number of the historical novels published in Belgium between 1830 and 1850, and which can be traced back to the ancient Greek romance, can undergo drastic revisions under the influence of the particular poetics of the Belgian historical novel. During the first two decades of Belgian independence the poetics of the genre was strongly determined by the nationalist and didactic function the historical novel was called upon to perform. I will illustrate how the first Flemish novelists harked back to traditional chronotopes (and their corresponding plots and motives) with which the largely uneducated Flemish public was familiar from a mostly oral folk tradition, and tried to remould these to accord with their own purposes and with the demands and regulations of the genre. In what is generally referred to as Bakhtin's third period (the period of his forced exile in Kazakhstan in the 1930s), Mikhail Bakhtin became interested in the question of genre, which he regarded as 'a key organ of memory and an important vehicle of historicity'. More specifically, it was the genre of the novel that awakened this interest.



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During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Bakhtin wrote six essays that deal with the theory of the novel: 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', 'The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism', 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', 'Epic and Novel', 'Discourse in the Novel' and 'The Novel of Education and Its Significance in the History of Realism'.

In their own way, these essays all trace and describe 'the establishment and growth of a generic skeleton of literature'.

The chronotope essays 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics' (henceforth referred to as FTC) and 'The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historic Typology of the Novel)' (henceforth referred to as BSHR) constitute the basis for the theoretical framework that is developed in my dissertation on 19th century Belgian historical novels. One of the case-studies from this dissertation is presented here, albeit in a considerably abridged form.

The main reason for choosing Bakhtin's chronotope theory for the textual analysis of Belgian historical novels written in the 1830s and 1840s is the hopeful prospect that Bakhtin's concept might help to shed some light on the essential hybridity of the genre. The chronotope essays chiefly trace the literary descent of what Bakhtin considers to be the various 'genres of the novel' (the adventure novel of ordeal, the adventure novel of everyday life, the chivalric romance, the (auto-)biographical novel, the idyllic romance, the folkloric romance, the Bildungsroman, etc.). Many of these 'sub genres' can be recognized in the multifarious set of novels that are lumped together in the first half of the 19th century under the common denominator 'historical novel'. This tracing of the literary descent leads Bakhtin to consider the literary works of the ancient Greeks and Romans as the 'authentic predecessors of the novel [...] containing in embryo and sometimes in developed form the basic elements characteristic of the most important later prototypes of the European novel'.

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In this light, the chronotope comes to function precisely as the primary principle that 'both defines genre and generic distinction and establishes the boundaries between the various intrageneric subcategories of the major literary types'.

The preface to the very first Flemish (historical) novel *In it Wonderjaer* (1837) testifies to the fact that the genre of the novel was still largely unknown in Flanders in the 1830s: the author, Hendrik Conscience, forewarns his public not to be frightened by the fact that he is presenting them with a novel.

## **18.2 Bakhtin's Concept of Polyphony**

As such, Bakhtin's philosophy greatly respected the influences of others on the self, not merely in terms of how a person comes to be, but also in how a person thinks and how a person sees him- or herself truthfully.

Third, Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky's work a true representation of "polyphony", that is, many voices. Each character in Dostoevsky's work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others. This idea of polyphony is related to the concepts of unfinalizability and self-and-others, since it is the unfinalizability of individuals that creates true polyphony.

Bakhtin briefly outlined the polyphonic concept of truth. He criticized the assumption that, if two people disagree, at least one of them must be in error. He challenged philosophers for whom plurality of minds is accidental and superfluous. For Bakhtin, truth is not a statement, a sentence or a phrase. Instead, truth is a number of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent, statements. Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by "a single mouth". The polyphonic truth requires many simultaneous voices. Bakhtin does not mean to say that many voices carry partial truths that complement each other. A number of different voices do not make the truth if simply "averaged" or "synthesized". It is the fact of mutual addressivity, of engagement, and of commitment to the context of a real-life event, that distinguishes truth from untruth.

When, in subsequent years, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art* was translated into English and published in the West, Bakhtin added a chapter on the concept of "carnival" and the book was published with the slightly different title, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. According to Bakhtin, carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together. The carnival creates the "threshold" situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible. The notion of a carnival was Bakhtin's way of describing Dostoevsky's polyphonic style: each individual character is strongly defined, and at the same time the reader witnesses the critical influence of each character upon the other. That is to say, the voices of others are heard by each individual, and each inescapably shapes the character of the other.

## **18.3 From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse – Critical Appreciation**

Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is a study on the history and construction of modern language in novels.

Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is composed of three parts, each offering a different component to his study of novelistic discourse. The first part is an introduction to novelistic discourse; Bakhtin introduces the five stylistic approaches to novelistic discourse and differentiates the novel from other forms of writing. The penultimate section of the essay focuses ancient Greek literature and stories, specifically parody sonnets, and acknowledges its impact on the current discourse in novels. In addition, the second portion of the essay incorporates the idea of polyglossia—the coexistence of multiple languages in the same area—to illustrate the challenges of construction a common vernacular within literature. The final part of the essay references the Middle Ages, medieval texts, and works from the Bible to show the growth of novelistic discourse through time (in comparison to the Greek texts).

Bakhtin's incorporation of the history of the Bible in relation to the term "polyglossia" offered a careful approach to one of the most unifying texts in the world. Bakhtin calls the Bible "authoritative



and sanctified", it is also widely read and interpreted by many across the world. However, the history of language and verbal discourse has the power to change meaning. While polyglossia complicated the novelistic discourse and how texts were read, the Bible remains the one text read and interpreted by many. Bakhtin also says that polyglossia contributed to debunking the myth of "straightforward genres", that it offers change and variety. Interestingly, when the Bible is interpreted, it is for moral meaning; the conversion of language over time and the various meanings it implies doesn't hold precedence.

The word hybrid is used repetitively in the essay to describe a crossbreeding of ideas. In part three of the essay, both parody and satire are referenced as "intentional hybrids" in linguistic discourse. However, "satire" is said to be complex. While both imply irony and imitation, parody is a composition of satire. The marriage of languages to produce a comical style and influential discourse should be problematic. Crossing languages would cause confusion and misinterpretation, but instead it enhanced the history of novelistic discourse.

Bakhtin discusses the origin and nature of the novel arguing that "mere literary styles" are not enough to analyze and define the novel, and instead we should focus on the relationships between the distinct elements that distinguish the novel from other genres.

Bakhtin begins by briefly charting the course of the attempt to analyze and define the novel, and the resulting failure, because of the failure to explore the "stylistic specificum, of the novel as a genre." Bakhtin then provides a few examples of the use of imagery and metaphor within a novel, and how these elements differ from their use in poetics. Bakhtin points out a distinctive characteristic of the novel "the image of the another's language and outlook on the world..., simultaneously represented and representing, is extremely typical of the novel." Bakhtin then discusses the relationship between the stylistic elements an author uses in a novel as "connected to one another and with the author via their own characteristic dialogical relationships." Bakhtin posits that it is these relationships that define the sense of style of a novel, and of the genre as a whole. Another distinguishing characteristic of the language in the novel, as mentioned above, is that language not only represents something in the world, but also "serves as the object of representation." In the next section of "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," Bakhtin discusses the idea of parody. Bakhtin spends a great deal of time going over the origin of parody and its varying roles, all to conclude that the novel allowed the author to examine language from "the point of view of a potentially different language and style." It is this "creating consciousness" that sets apart the novel from other genres. Parody within the novel is a parody about an object (like the use of parody in other genres) but this parody itself becomes an object. The final section of "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," is an exploration of the use of the quotation. Like the other elements that distinguish the novel, Bakhtin spends some time going over the origin and use of the quotation, ending in its use today in the novel. Through his discourse on quotation, Bakhtin determines that the quotation was one of the first elements responsible for parody. "Latin parody, is therefore, a bilingual phenomenon," concludes Bakhtin. Bakhtin ends by reminding the reader that we cannot examine the prehistory of the novelistic word with "mere literary styles."

Bakhtin's essay was tough to comprehend. The beginning of the essay had a much easier pace and clearer direction to read to, so that it was much more understandable. What I got lost in was the myriad examples Bakhtin employed to illustrate his point. More so than any other author we have read, Bakhtin relied upon the use of multiple and detailed examples to make his point. However, I did identify with Bakhtin's first discussion on the language of the novel. Here, Bakhtin was able to isolate what it is that distinguishes the novel from other genre's, that is, its unique ability to represent an external object, but also be itself an object; the language of the novel both represents and is representing simultaneously. Bakhtin said, "Novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself," which strongly resonated for me with Paul de Man's theory on the resistance to theory. De Man concludes, that theory is resistance to itself in the same way that Bakhtin concludes that the language of the novel criticizes itself. One of the weak points I found in Bakhtin's essay was during the beginning, when he made some very hasty premises to his argument, such as, the "Five different stylistic approaches to the novelistic discourse..." Another concept, which I couldn't fully grasp in Bakhtin's essay, was his concept of parody. Bakhtin spent page after page talking

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directly and indirectly about the nature and use of parody, even going into its early use in the Middle Age carnival. Even if I didn't understand, necessarily, Bakhtin's concept of parody, it did find it a fascinating subject to focus on. Rarely do these theoreticians focus on the notion of the comedy, specifically, and it was an interesting notion as to attribute it to the inception of the early novel. Bakhtin's last paragraph was an interesting shift from the rest of the novel. Separated by a space, the last paragraph concisely summed up Bakhtin's discourse on the prehistory of the novel, underscoring the importance of the history of the formation of the novel, beyond the interests of "mere literary styles." Staying true to his form, Bakhtin's last words included a number of examples.

### **18.4 The Dialogic Imagination: Chronotope, Heteroglossia**

The Dialogic Imagination (first published as a whole in 1975) is a compilation of four essays concerning language and the novel: "Epic and Novel" (1941), "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" (1940), "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1937-1938), and "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-1935). It is through the essays contained within The Dialogic Imagination that Bakhtin introduces the concepts of heteroglossia, dialogism and chronotope, making a significant contribution to the realm of literary scholarship. Bakhtin explains the generation of meaning through the "primacy of context over text" (heteroglossia), the hybrid nature of language (polyglossia) and the relation between utterances (intertextuality). Heteroglossia is "the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance." To make an utterance means to "appropriate the words of others and populate them with one's own intention. Bakhtin's deep insights on dialogicality represent a substantive shift from views on the nature of language and knowledge by major thinkers as Ferdinand de Saussure and Immanuel Kant.

In "Epic and Novel", Bakhtin demonstrates the novel's distinct nature by contrasting it with the epic. By doing so, Bakhtin shows that the novel is well-suited to the post-industrial civilization in which we live because it flourishes on diversity. It is this same diversity that the epic attempts to eliminate from the world. According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is unique in that it is able to embrace, ingest, and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a novel. Other genres, however, cannot emulate the novel without damaging their own distinct identity.

"From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is a less traditional essay in which Bakhtin reveals how various different texts from the past have ultimately come together to form the modern novel.

"Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" introduces Bakhtin's concept of chronotope. This essay applies the concept in order to further demonstrate the distinctive quality of the novel. The word chronotope literally means "time space" and is defined by Bakhtin as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature." For the purpose of his writing, an author must create entire worlds and, in doing so, is forced to make use of the organizing categories of the real world in which he lives. For this reason chronotope is a concept that engages reality.

The final essay, "Discourse in the Novel", is one of Bakhtin's most complete statements concerning his philosophy of language. It is here that Bakhtin provides a model for a history of discourse and introduces the concept of heteroglossia. The term heteroglossia refers to the qualities of a language that are extralinguistic, but common to all languages. These include qualities such as perspective, evaluation, and ideological positioning. In this way most languages are incapable of neutrality, for every word is inextricably bound to the context in which it exists.

In the philosophy of language and philology, chronotope is a term coined by M.M. Bakhtin to describe the way time and space are described by language, and, in particular, how literature represents them. The term itself (Russian: *ХРОНОТОП*), from Greek: *Χρόνος* ("time") and *τόπος* ("space"), can be literally translated as "time-space." Bakhtin developed the term in his 1937 essay "Russian: *ФОРМЫ ВРЕМЕНИ И ХРОНОТОПА В РОМАНЕ*", published in English as "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.

Bakhtin scholars Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist state that the chronotope is "a unit of analysis for studying language according to the ratio and characteristics of the temporal and spatial categories represented in that language". Specific chronotopes are said to correspond to

particular genres, or relatively stable ways of speaking, which themselves represent particular world views or ideologies. To this extent, a chronotope is both a cognitive concept and a narrative feature of language.

In the Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin defines the Chronotope:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture.' In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.

### **Analysis**

The distinctiveness of chronotopic analysis, in comparison to most other uses of time and space in language analysis, stems from the fact that neither time nor space is privileged by Bakhtin, they are utterly interdependent and they should be studied in this manner.

Linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso invoked "chronotopes" in discussing Western [Apache] stories linked with places. At least in the 1980s when Basso was writing about the stories, geographic features reminded the Western Apache of "the moral teachings of their history" by recalling to mind events that occurred there in important moral narratives. By merely mentioning "it happened at [the place called] 'men stand above here and there,'" storyteller Nick Thompson could remind locals of the dangers of joining "with outsiders against members of their own community." Geographic features in the Western Apache landscape are chronotopes, Basso says, in precisely the way Bakhtin defines the term when he says they are "points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people. ...Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves".

### ***Speech Genres and Other Late Essays***

In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* Bakhtin moves away from the novel and concerns himself with the problems of method and the nature of culture. There are six essays that comprise this compilation: "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff", "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism", "The Problem of Speech Genres", "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis", "From Notes Made in 1970-71," and "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences."

"Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff" is a transcript of comments made by Bakhtin to a reporter from a monthly journal called *Novy Mir* that was widely read by Soviet intellectuals. The transcript expresses Bakhtin's opinion of literary scholarship whereby he highlights some of its shortcomings and makes suggestions for improvement.

"The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism" is a fragment from one of Bakhtin's lost books. The publishing house to which Bakhtin had submitted the full manuscript was blown up during the German invasion and Bakhtin was in possession of only the prospectus.

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However, due to a shortage of paper, Bakhtin began using this remaining section to roll cigarettes. So only a portion of the opening section remains. This remaining section deals primarily with Goethe.

"The Problem of Speech Genres" deals with the difference between Saussurean linguistics and language as a living dialogue (translinguistics). In a relatively short space, this essay takes up a topic about which Bakhtin had planned to write a book, making the essay a rather dense and complex read. It is here that Bakhtin distinguishes between literary and everyday language. According to Bakhtin, genres exist not merely in language, but rather in communication. In dealing with genres, Bakhtin indicates that they have been studied only within the realm of rhetoric and literature, but each discipline draws largely on genres that exist outside both rhetoric and literature. These extraliterary genres have remained largely unexplored. Bakhtin makes the distinction between primary genres and secondary genres, whereby primary genres legislate those words, phrases, and expressions that are acceptable in everyday life, and secondary genres are characterized by various types of text such as legal, scientific, etc.

"The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" is a compilation of the thoughts Bakhtin recorded in his notebooks. These notes focus mostly on the problems of the text, but various other sections of the paper discuss topics he has taken up elsewhere, such as speech genres, the status of the author, and the distinct nature of the human sciences. However, "The Problem of the Text" deals primarily with dialogue and the way in which a text relates to its context. Speakers, Bakhtin claims, shape an utterance according to three variables: the object of discourse, the immediate addressee, and a superaddressee. This is what Bakhtin describes as the tertiary nature of dialogue.

"From Notes Made in 1970-71" appears also as a collection of fragments extracted from notebooks Bakhtin kept during the years of 1970 and 1971. It is here that Bakhtin discusses interpretation and its endless possibilities. According to Bakhtin, humans have a habit of making narrow interpretations, but such limited interpretations only serve to weaken the richness of the past.

The final essay, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences", originates from notes Bakhtin wrote during the mid-seventies and is the last piece of writing Bakhtin produced before he died. In this essay he makes a distinction between dialectic and dialogics and comments on the difference between the text and the aesthetic object. It is here also, that Bakhtin differentiates himself from the Formalists, who, he felt, underestimated the importance of content while oversimplifying change, and the Structuralists, who too rigidly adhered to the concept of "code."

## Influence

He is known today for his interest in a wide variety of subjects, ideas, vocabularies, and periods, as well as his use of authorial disguises, and for his influence (alongside György Lukács) on the growth of Western scholarship on the novel as a premiere literary genre. As a result of the breadth of topics with which he dealt, Bakhtin has influenced such Western schools of theory as Neo-Marxism, Structuralism, and Semiotics. However, his influence on such groups has, somewhat paradoxically, resulted in narrowing the scope of Bakhtin's work. According to Clark and Holquist, rarely do those who incorporate Bakhtin's ideas into theories of their own appreciate his work in its entirety.

While Bakhtin is traditionally seen as a literary critic, there can be no denying his impact on the realm of rhetorical theory. Among his many theories and ideas Bakhtin indicates that style is a developmental process, occurring both within the user of language and language itself. His work instills in the reader an awareness of tone and expression that arises from the careful formation of verbal phrasing. By means of his writing, Bakhtin has enriched the experience of verbal and written expression which ultimately aids the formal teaching of writing. Some even suggest that Bakhtin introduces a new meaning to rhetoric because of his tendency to reject the separation of language and ideology.

This essay mainly focuses on a single Flemish 'adaptation' of one of the oldest chronotopes Bakhtin has distinguished, the chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal. The particular case of Joseph

Ronsse's historical novel *Arnold van Schoorisse* (1845) can, however, be seen as symptomatic for a great number of Belgian historical novels. First Bakhtin's characterization of this chronotope. In *FTC*, Bakhtin analyses the chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal predominantly in the cases of the very earliest examples of this type of novel, the so called Greek or Sophistic romances. As Carlos García Gual has demonstrated, some of these Greek romances (especially Chariton's *Chareas* and *Callirhoë* and Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*) may be regarded as historical novels, and were indeed received as such in ancient times. The action in these romances is projected towards a - albeit only feebly characterized - past, historical characters figure in a minor role (often as parents of the heroes), and certain characters and scenes echo the works of historians like Herodotus and Thucydides.

As for space, in these novels it 'figures in solely as a naked, abstract expanse of space', 'measured primarily by distance on the one hand and by proximity on the other'. Thus, '[t]he adventure chronotope is [...] characterized by a technical, abstract connection [not an organic one, nb] between space and time, by the reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence, and by their interchangeability in space'.

As I would like to illustrate, the traditional chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal as Bakhtin described it has undergone particular - and in some novels quite significant - changes under the influence of the specific poetics of the Belgian historical novel, as it is expressed mainly in prefaces and works of literary criticism. In previous articles, I have argued that the case of the early 19th century Belgian historical novel shows how prefaces - which in the 18th century had proved to be the privileged loci for expressing the literary novelistic consciousness - also offered an ideal discursive climate for addressing issues of nation building and collective memory. Detailed analyses of the nationalist discourse in the prefaces to the historical novels written in Belgium in the first two decades after independence, focussing on the discourses about memory and national identity, have revealed that both the concept of the native soil (space) and the genealogical link between the glorious ancestors and their descendants (time) have played a major role in the construction of this nationalist discourse.

The historical chronotope in this type of historic adventure novels of ordeal, as we can now call them, can be encountered predominantly, and sometimes only, in the footnotes and endnotes. The nationalist discourse that can be found in the prefaces thus cannot be said to have greatly increased the amount of concretization of time and space. However, it is certainly explicitly and abundantly present in the discourse of certain characters (in their speeches, dialogues, monologues). I will here mention only one example, other examples can be found in the endnotes to this paper. On the eve of the decisive battle at Westrozebeke, Philip van Artevelde reminds his fellow citizens of the glorious deeds of their forefathers in Groeninge in the way the 19th century historical novelists remind their contemporaries of the ancestral heroism: 'Herinnert u allen de heldendaden uwer vaderen'. That Ronsse made the 19th century nationalist discourse serve as a model for Artevelde's discourse in *Arnold van Schoorisse* can be seen for instance in Artevelde's confident exclamation that 'nieuwe Breydels en de Coninks zyn weër opgerezen om hunne stadgenooten tot de overwinning te geleiden' ('new Breydel's and de Coninck's have risen again to lead their fellow citizens to victory'): the main characters from Conscience's *De Leeuw van Vlaenderen* only became legendary in the 19th century. A perfect example of the little influence the nationalist discourse has exerted on the categories of time and space in the novel is provided by the ensuing description of the battle at Westrozebeke. By reminding the citizens of Ghent and Bruges of the fact that 'de vermolmdge gebeenderen uwer vrye vaderen [nog] rusten [...] in den heiligen grond van Groeninge' ('the mouldered bones of your free fathers still rest in the holy soil of Groeninge') Philip van Artevelde succeeds in arousing their nationalist feelings. In his speech the imaginary space of 'Vlaenderen' is charged with historicity through the mentioning of such places as Groeninge, through the stressing of the need to free the native soil of 'uitheemsch[...] gebroedse!' ('foreign scum') and through the call to let the blood of the last oppressor spill under Flemish axes. The



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native soil is saturated with the past (literally, through the image of the corpses buried in the ground) and even acquires a holy character. Likewise, time becomes charged with historicity as well: the battle that is to take place the next day, '[zal] de onafhankelykheid der Vlamingen vereeuwigen, of hen op nieuw met boeijen overladen' ('will perpetuate the independence of the Flemings, or put them back in chains'). However, Ronsse importantly does not succeed in introducing this historicity into the descriptions of the actual novelistic space. The historical chronotope in Arnold van Schoorisse is only created in the imagination of the characters, it is not realised in the novel's 'reality' (in its chronotope): in the description of the battle the next day, the space of the native country once more completely disappears into the background, and actions such as 'rushing forward', 'fleeing', 'hastening to help', 'gaining ground', 'recoiling', 'pursuing', 'surrounding' and 'cutting short' all take place against a completely abstract background. This abstract quality of time and space is a necessity in any adventure novel of ordeal. As Bakhtin explains, it is a prerequisite for the ruling principle of 'chance' to be able to operate to its fullest: Every concretization, of even the most simple and everyday variety, would introduce its own rule-generating force, its own order, its inevitable ties to human life and to the time specific to that life. Events would end up being interwoven with these rules, and to a greater or lesser extent would find themselves participating in this order, subject to its ties. This would critically limit the power of chance; the movement of the adventures would be organically localized and tied down in time and space.

## Plot

The amorous plot-line is however still introduced in the first chapter, in the story of Arnold's and Isabella's marriage and Isabella's subsequent abduction, and at the end the motif is even doubled by the introduction of another couple (Oda van Schoorisse and Frans Ackerman) about to get married. The deep indebtedness of Arnold van Schoorisse to the Greek romance reveals itself in the fact that Ackerman is first introduced as Oda's lover (and thus as a hero in the amorous plot-line), and is to figure as a historical character only in the next chapter. Further in the novel, however, it will become clear that Arnold's unremitting (and uncritical) loyalty to the Count of Mâle largely stems from a curse that 'de zwarte ridder' ('the black knight'), a long-time persecutor of Arnold's family who had abducted Arnold's wife Isabella seventeen years before, has laid upon Arnold's daughter Oda. The black knight had added a stipulation to this curse, promising that if Arnold should ever succeed in being knighted by the Count as a reward for his faithful service, he himself would honour the precepts of knighthood, and would respect and even protect Oda, because from then on she would be 'het erfdeel eens ridders' ('the inheritance of a knight') (I, 38). The reason for Arnold's loyalty is therefore primarily to be situated on the 'individual' (and predominantly amorous) plane of events, not on the political plane. As in the traditional adventure novel of ordeal, the faith of the main characters is for the most part never under debate in Arnold van Schoorisse: the whole novel is conceived as a proof of this faith, rather than as a test in which the heroes might fail.

## Central Motif

The central motif of faith also informs the many oaths sworn in this novel - the crucifixes in the bedrooms of the 'persecuted maidens' Isabella and Oda seem to be present for this purpose only. Characters in the novel are, moreover, often evaluated on the basis of their trustworthiness and sincerity: they are characterized as honest and sincere, or as 'lasteraer' ('slanderer'), 'schynheilig' ('hypocritical') or 'valschaert' ('imposter'). This opposition receives its clearest expression in Oda's characterization of her respective suitors Frans Ackerman and Walter van Herzeele (Arnold's best friend, who will later turn out to be none other than the black knight). The words of Ackerman are 'waer als het H. Evangelie' ('as true as the gospel'); in Walter's words on the contrary 'schuilt iets listigs' ('they contain something cunning and deceitful'), and Oda remains on her guard against the 'listen en lagen' ('cunning schemes') of the 'valschaert'.

Walter van Herzele not only plays the role of false friend in the 'individual' plot-sequence, where he uses his position as Arnold's best friend and confidant for his own scheming to get Oda to renounce Ackerman and marry him instead, he also (and successfully) plays this role on the historical plane, where he stands in the grace of both opposed political parties and knows their secrets: *Walter was [...] in de gunsten des Graven, even als in die der opstandelingen gedrongen: de geheimen der beide gezindheden doorgrondde hy: de belangen van den Prins, even als die der Gentenaers, werden door hem in schyn verdedigd; en nauw was de eene of andere maetregel genomen, of hy werd aen de vyandyke benden overgebriefd.*

had come into the Count's favour, as well as in that of the rebels: he fathomed the secrets of both parties: both the interests of the Prince and of the citizens of Ghent were defended by him, but only in name; and hardly had one or the other measure been taken, before it was passed on to the enemy[.]

## Self-Assessment

### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Bakhtin's Chronotope theory was written in ..... .
- (a) 1830s (b) 1850s  
(c) 1820s (d) none of these
- (ii) Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky's work a true representation of ..... .
- (a) menotomy (b) metaphor  
(c) polyphony (d) none of these
- (iii) The hybrid nature of language in ..... .
- (a) heteroglossia (b) dialogism  
(c) polyglossia (d) none of these
- (iv) Chronotope is a term coined to ..... .
- (a) M.M. Bakhtin (b) Michael Holoquist  
(c) Caryl Emerson (d) none of these.

## 18.5 Summary

- Bakhtin was concerned with language or discourse as a social activity. The Bakhtin School comprising Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Volosphinov believed 'words' to be active, dynamic, that had several connotations and would mean something different to a different person or social hierarchy or whose meaning would differ according to time and place. Earlier linguist patronised the view that language was 'isolated ... divorced from its verbal and actual contest'. The Bakhtin School used the Russian word 'solvo' which can and is translated into English as 'word', but the Russian connotation extends a social flavour that would more readily imply utterance 'or even' discourse.
- Bakhtin considered the novel to be such a dynamic genre that would eventually take over, many other genres. For instance, Epic, which was characterized (according to Bakhtin) by an uncrossable gulf separating the characters and events from the audience was eventually subsumed by the novel, in such a way that a separation would be unthinkable.
- Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope concept offers for the study of the intrinsically hybrid genre of the historical novel. By applying the concept to the analysis of the early 19th -century Flemish historical novel, I illustrate how the chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal, which structures a significant number of the historical novels published in Belgium between 1830 and 1850, and which can be traced back to the ancient Greek romance, can undergo drastic revisions under the influence of the particular poetics of the Belgian historical novel.
- The chronotope essays 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics' (henceforth referred to as FTC) and 'The Bildungsroman and Its

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Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historic Typology of the Novel)' (henceforth referred to as BSHR) constitute the basis for the theoretical framework that is developed in my dissertation on 19th century Belgian historical novels. One of the case-studies from this dissertation is presented here, albeit in a considerably abridged form.

- Bakhtin begins by briefly charting the course of the attempt to analysis and define the novel, and the resulting failure, because of the failure to explore the "stylistic specificum, of the novel as a genre." Bakhtin then provides a few examples of the use of imagery and metaphor within a novel, and how these elements different from their use in poetics. Bakhtin points out a distinctive characteristic of the novel "the image of the another's language and outlook on the world..., simultaneously represented and representing, is extremely typical of the novel."
- "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" is a less traditional essay in which Bakhtin reveals how various different texts from the past have ultimately come together to form the modern novel.

## 18.6 Key-Words

1. Polyglossia : Basically polyglossia situations involve two contrasting varieties (high and low) but in general it refers to communities that regularly use more than two languages.
2. Lexical borrowing : It results from the lack of vocabulary and it involves borrowing single words - mainly nouns. When speaking a second language, people will often use a term from their first language because they don't know the appropriate word in their second language. They also my borrow words from another language to express a concept or describe an object for which there is no obvious word available in the language they are using.

## 18.7 Review Questions

1. What is the Concept of Chronotopes? Discuss.
2. Discuss the Concept of Polyphony.
3. Examine Bakhtin's, "from the prehistory of Novelistic Discourse".

## **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (a)

## 18.8 Further Readings



### Books

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## Unit 19: Two Types of Orientalism – Orientalism as a Literary Theory

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Orientalism.
- Explain two Types of Orientalism.
- Discuss Orientalism as a Literary Theory.

### Introduction

Orientalism is the study of Near and Far Eastern societies and cultures, languages and peoples by Western scholars. It can also refer to the imitation or depiction of aspects of Eastern cultures in the West by writers, designers and artists.

In the former meaning the term Orientalism has come to acquire negative connotations in some quarters and is interpreted to refer to the study of the East by Westerners shaped by the attitudes of the era of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. When used in this sense, it implies old-fashioned and prejudiced outsider interpretations of Eastern cultures and peoples. This viewpoint was most famously articulated and propagated by Edward Said in his controversial 1978 book *Orientalism*, which was critical of this scholarly tradition and of modern scholars including Princeton University professor Bernard Lewis.

Orientalism is a term used by art historians, literary and cultural studies scholars for the imitation or depiction of aspects of Middle Eastern, and East Asian cultures (Eastern cultures) by American and European writers, designers and artists. In particular, Orientalist painting, depicting more specifically "the Middle East", was one of the many specialisms of 19th century Academic art. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the term has arguably acquired a negative connotation.

### 19.1 Meaning of the Term

"Orientalism" refers to the Orient or East, in contrast to the Occident or West, and often, as seen by the West.

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"Orientalism" is widely used in art, to refer to the works of the many Western 19th century artists, who specialized in "Oriental" subjects, often drawing on their travels to Western Asia. Artists as well as scholars were already described as "Orientalists" in the 19th century, especially in France, where the term, with a rather dismissive sense, was largely popularized by the critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary. Such disdain did not prevent the Société des Peintres Orientalistes ("Society of Orientalist Painters") being founded in 1893, with Jean-Léon Gérôme as honorary president; the word was less often used as a term for artists in 19th century England.

Since the 18th century, "Orientalist" has been the traditional term for a scholar of Oriental studies; however the use in English of "Orientalism" to describe the academic subject of "Oriental studies" is rare; the Oxford English Dictionary cites only one such usage, by Lord Byron in 1812. The academic discipline of Oriental studies is now more often called Asian studies. In 1978, the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said published his influential and controversial book, *Orientalism*, which "would forever redefine" the word; he used the term to describe a pervasive Western tradition, both academic and artistic, of prejudiced outsider interpretations of the East, shaped by the attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Said was critical of both this scholarly tradition and of some modern scholars, particularly Bernard Lewis. Said was mainly concerned with literature in the widest sense, especially French literature, and did not cover visual art and Orientalist painting, though others, notably Linda Nochlin, have tried to extend his analysis to art, "with uneven results". Said's work has given rise to a new discipline called Postcolonialism or Postcolonial studies.

Like the term Orient itself Orientalism derives from a Latin word *Oriens* referring simply to the rising of the sun, to imply "the East" in a relative sense. This is the opposite of the term Occident, which has largely dropped from common usage. Similar terms are the French-derived Levant and Anatolia, from the Greek *anatole*, two further locutions for the direction in which the sun rises. In terms of The Old World, Europe was considered to be 'The West' or Occidental, and the furthest known Eastern extremity 'The East' or 'The Orient'.

From at least the time of the Roman Empire until at least the Middle Ages, what is now considered 'the Middle East' was then considered 'the Orient'. During that period, the flourishing cultures of the Far East were little known, just as Europe was essentially unknown in 'the Far East'. Over time, the common understanding of 'the Orient' has continually shifted East as Western explorers traveled deeper into Asia. In Biblical times, the Three Wise Men 'from the Orient' were actually Magi from "The East" (relative to Palestine) meaning 'the Persian Empire'. After all period, as Europe gained knowledge of countries further to the East, the definition of the limit of 'the Orient' progressively shifted eastwards, until the Pacific Ocean was reached, in what is also known as 'the Far East'. This can cause some confusion about the historical and geographic scope of Oriental Studies.

However, there still remain some contexts where 'the Orient' or 'Oriental' refer to older definitions. For example, 'Oriental Spices' typically come from regions extending from the Middle East through the Indian sub-continent to Indo-China. Also, travel on the Orient Express (from Paris to Istanbul), is eastward bound (towards the sunrise), but does not reach what is currently understood to be the Orient.

In contemporary English, Oriental is usually a synonym for the peoples, cultures and goods from the parts of East Asia traditionally occupied by East Asians and Southeast Asians, excluding Indians, Arabs and other more westerly peoples. In some parts of America it is considered derogatory to use this term to refer to Asians (whether East, South, West or Central Asians). For example, in Washington state it is illegal to use the word 'oriental' in legislation and government documents .

## **19.2 History of Orientalism**

It is difficult to be precise about the origin of the distinction between the "West" and the "East". However the rise of both Christianity and Islam produced a sharp opposition between European Christendom and the Muslim cultures to the East and in North Africa. During the Middle Ages Islamic peoples were the "alien" enemies of the Christian world. [citation needed] European



knowledge of cultures further to the East was very sketchy. Nevertheless, there was a vague awareness that complex civilizations existed in India and China, from which luxury goods such as woven textiles and ceramics were imported. As European explorations and colonisations expanded a distinction emerged between non-literate peoples, for example in Africa and the Americas, and the literate cultures of the East.

In the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers sometimes characterized aspects of Eastern cultures as superior to the Christian West. For example Voltaire promoted research into Zoroastrianism in the belief that it would support a rational Deism superior to Christianity. Others praised the relative religious tolerance of Islamic countries in contrast with the Christian West, or the status of scholarship in Mandarin China. With the translation of the Avesta by Abraham Anquetil-Duperron and the discovery of the Indo-European languages by William Jones complex connections between the early history of Eastern and Western cultures emerged. However, these developments occurred in the context of rivalry between France and Britain for control of India, and it is sometimes claimed were associated with attempts to understand colonised cultures in order more effectively to control them. Liberal economists such as James Mill denigrated Eastern countries on the grounds that their civilizations were static and corrupt. Karl Marx characterised the "Asiatic mode of production" as unchanging and praised British colonialism in India. Christian evangelists sought to denigrate Eastern religious traditions as superstitions (see Juggernaut).

Despite this, the first serious European studies of Buddhism and Hinduism were undertaken by scholars such as Eugene Burnouf and Max Müller. In this period serious study of Islam also emerged. By the mid-19th century Oriental Studies was an established academic discipline. However, while scholarly study expanded, so did racist attitudes and popular stereotypes of "inscrutable" and "wily" orientals. Often scholarly ideas were intertwined with such prejudicial racial or religious assumptions. Eastern art and literature were still seen as "exotic" and as inferior to Classical Graeco-Roman ideals. Their political and economic systems were generally thought to be feudal "oriental despotisms" and their alleged cultural inertia was considered to be resistant to progress. Many critical theorists regard this form of Orientalism as part of a larger, ideological colonialism justified by the concept of the "white man's burden".

### 19.3 Orientalism in the Arts

#### Imitations of Oriental Styles

Similar ambivalence is evident in art and literature. From the Renaissance to the 18th century Western designers attempted to imitate the technical sophistication of Chinese ceramics with only partial success. Chinoiserie is the catch-all term for the fashion for Chinese themes in decoration in Western Europe, beginning in the late 17th century and peaking in waves, especially Rococo Chinoiserie, ca 1740-1770. Early hints of Chinoiserie appear, in the 17th century, in the nations with active East India companies: England (the British East India Company), Denmark (the Danish East India Company), Holland (the Dutch East India Company) and France (the French East India Company). Tin-glazed pottery made at Delft and other Dutch towns adopted genuine blue-and-white Ming decoration from the early 17th century, and early ceramic wares at Meissen and other centers of true porcelain imitated Chinese shapes for dishes, vases and teawares (see Chinese export porcelain). But in the true Chinoiserie décor fairyland, mandarins lived in fanciful mountainous landscapes with cobweb bridges, carried flower parasols, lolled in flimsy bamboo pavilions haunted by dragons and phoenixes, while monkeys swung from scrolling borders.

Pleasure pavilions in "Chinese taste" appeared in the formal parterres of late Baroque and Rococo German palaces, and in tile panels at Aranjuez near Madrid. Thomas Chippendale's mahogany tea tables and china cabinets, especially, were embellished with fretwork glazing and railings, ca 1753 - 70, but sober homages to early Xing scholars' furnishings were also naturalized, as the tang evolved into a mid-Georgian side table and squared slat-back armchairs suited English gentlemen as well as Chinese scholars. Not every adaptation of Chinese design principles falls within mainstream "chinoiserie." Chinoiserie media included imitations of lacquer and painted tin (tôle) ware that imitated japanning, early painted wallpapers in sheets, and ceramic figurines and table

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ornaments. Small pagodas appeared on chimneypieces and full-sized ones in gardens. Kew has a magnificent garden pagoda designed by Sir William Chambers.

After 1860, Japoniserie, sparked by the arrival of Japanese woodblock prints, became an important influence in the western arts in particular on many modern French artists such as Monet. The paintings of James McNeill Whistler and his "Peacock Room" are some of the finest works of the genre; other examples include the Gamble House and other buildings by California architects Greene and Greene.

### Depictions of the Orient in Art and Literature

"Le Bain turc," (Turkish Bath) by J.A.D. Ingres, 1862 Depictions of Islamic "Moors" and "Turks" (imprecisely named Muslim groups of North Africa and West Asia) can be found in Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art. But it was not until the 19th century that "Orientalism" in the arts became an established theme. In these works the myth of the Orient as exotic and corrupt is most fully articulated. Such works typically concentrated on Near-Eastern Islamic cultures. Artists such as Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme painted many depictions of Islamic culture, often including lounging odalisques, and stressing lassitude and visual spectacle. When Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, director of the French Académie de peinture painted a highly-colored vision of a turkish bath (illustration, right), he made his eroticized Orient publicly acceptable by his diffuse generalizing of the female forms, who might all have been of the same model. If his painting had simply been retitled "In a Paris Brothel," it would have been far less acceptable. Sensuality was seen as acceptable in the exotic Orient. This orientalizing imagery persisted in art into the early 20th century, as evidenced in Matisse's orientalist nudes. In these works the "Orient" often functions as a mirror to Western culture itself, or as a way of expressing its hidden or illicit aspects. In Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* ancient Carthage in North Africa is used as a foil to ancient Rome. Its culture is portrayed as morally corrupting and suffused with dangerously alluring eroticism. This novel proved hugely influential on later portrayals of ancient Semitic cultures.

Orientalism refers to a particular academic tradition in the West, preoccupied with conceptualising and representing the Oriental, albeit non-Western societies/cultures as the opposite - or the 'other' of the Occident (Said 1979)]. The emergence of orientalism has a particular historical context, that is, the global ascendancy of the West, with the development of capitalism.

What is wrong with Orientalism? First, it misrepresents the social-cultural reality of both the East and the West in an attempt to present the latter as rational, forward looking, humane, and civilised, the characteristics typically absent in the latter, resulting in two types of society: one, with history and the other, without history. It tends to turn history into a "moral" project (Wolf 1982), with the good side emerging victorious in humanity's quest of progress. By presenting the progress of the West as a natural consequence of the intrinsic virtues of Western culture, it distorts the historical reality of Western modernity that is far from idyllic. It ignores the real history of the progress of the West in which the histories of the East and the West are intricately intertwined.

Historically, the development of capitalism was premised on colonialism. Colonialism was a coercive process. In the realisation of this project of Western domination, Orientalism serves an important ideological function. It not only justifies West's exploitation of the rest, rather, it turns it into a historic mission of West's noble attempt to help the 'other', the backward, the uncivilised, savage Orient to "assimilate" with the West. In other words, Orientalism turns the history of modernity upside down.

### 19.4 Latent and Manifest Orientalism

In this Unit, Said shows how latent and manifest Orientalism worked in conjunction with the West's academic, scientific and economic strength to reproduce a cycle of the Orient's marginalization and the West's domination. Latent Orientalism refers to the philosophical and subconscious applications of superiority, and I interpreted manifest Orientalism as the application of latent in order to secure and justify Eurocentric perceptions through socially revered institutions, such as science, government, economy, etc.

- When thinking about latent orientalism, I immediately thought about the frightening racial superiority constructions that lead to human genocide such as the German third Reich party in WWII. The more I learn about the post-colonial political ramifications of racial superiority constructions, the more I realize that the past constructions manifest themselves in different ways. How do you think racial/ethnic superiority has manifested itself in contemporary times?

In order to isolate the East from social movement "in the deepest sense of the word," (208) the West feminizes the East in order to distance Oriental men from power and to conglomerate power with only European, aristocratic men. The analogies relating the East with feminine attributes implied an inherent weakness and dependency of the East on the West, and this mentality justified the West overtaking geographical space in order to help the "uncivilized" Orient.

- This section immediately reminded me of corporate chains incorporating into international spaces as symbols of civilization and progress, as if other countries could not be civilized without them. Do you see any other contemporary relationships where one country is feminized by the other in order to take over geographical space?

I chose the above painting to tie European dominance, feminization and geography together. I interpret the center to be a representation of Mother England because 1) Queen Victoria was the reigning monarch at the time and 2) qualities associated with motherhood such as charity, selflessness, devotion, leadership, etc. reflect the Orientalist perception of the West's role in the East. Also, I see this woman as implying a virgin sexual purity, because this polarizes England from the Orientalist definition of Oriental women as naturally sexually charged. The way she is reclining on top of the world with the other ethnic representations looking towards her at the center really hits the point: England saw themselves as the center of everyone else's Universe! She is not only at the center, but also at the top of the world, and I understand her, holding Poseidon's staff, to be a symbol of dominance, empire and control over the oceans, nature and maybe even God.

## 19.5 Literary Theory and Children's Literature

Child psychology and children's literature can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with childhood—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, child psychology and children's literature as an adult style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over childhood.

Anyone distressed by these strongly critical words about our institutions for dealing with children will be happy to hear that I have made the words up. Or more accurately, I have borrowed them: I have merely inserted phrases relating to childhood institutions into a quotation that actually discusses a quite different topic: Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said 3) I came upon the original quotation in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a brilliant investigation of European attitudes towards Arabs and Asians. Said works to reveal that what we call "the Orient" has little to do with actual conditions in the East—that it is more significantly a European invention that has had a powerful influence of how Europeans have not only thought about but also acted upon the East.

As I read through Said's powerful descriptions of the history and structure of Orientalism, I was continually astonished by how often they suggested to me parallel insights into our most common assumptions about childhood and children's literature. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so astonished: after all, Jacqueline Rose's influential discussion of "the impossibility of children's fiction" works from the premise that children's literature is a form of colonization.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, an exploration of the parallels between Said's descriptions of Orientalism and our representations of childhood in both child psychology and children's literature reveals a number of interesting things.

Notes

**1. Inherent Inferiority**

According to Europeans, Europeans must describe and analyze the Orient because Orientals are not capable of describing or analyzing themselves. Not only is Orientalism an area of study that can be pursued only by outsiders, but what defines them as outside of their subject is, exactly, their ability to study it: "the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact". Orientalism is thus inherently and inevitably a study of what theorists often call the other—of that which is opposite to the person doing the talking or thinking or studying.<sup>2</sup> Since the opposite of studying is an inability to study, the other is always conceived by those who study it to be unable to study itself, to see or speak for itself. Thus, what the study will always focus on is how and why the other lacks one's own capabilities.

It's fairly obvious that our descriptions of childhood similarly purport to see and speak for children, and that we believe them to be similarly incapable of speaking for themselves. As far as I know, the writers and readers of the Children's Literature Association Quarterly ate adults; children are not the ones who write either the texts we identify as children's literature or the criticism of those texts. Said's words force us to face the uncomfortable conclusion that our attempting to speak for and about children in these ways will always confirm their difference from, and presumably, inferiority to, ourselves as thinkers and speakers.

Of course, we may claim to believe that the inability of children to speak for themselves is not inferiority at all, but a wonderfully ideal state of innocence, just as Europeans have claimed throughout history to admire what they have interpreted as a lack of analytical reason in Orientals. But this supposed admiration of the inability to see and speak is undercut by the fact that it is based at least in theory on observation—seeing—and then, spoken about; it makes the other wonderful at the expense of making it not like us—in essence, not quite human. We undercut our admiration of the inability to speak as we do ourselves in the very act of speaking so enthusiastically about it.

**2. Inherent Femaleness**

Representations of those who can't see or speak for themselves are and must always be engendered by outsiders—those who can see and speak. According to Lacan's theory of the gaze, all such representations imply the right of he who observes and interprets to observe and interpret; he who can fix others in his gaze, and thus define who they are as no more and no less than what he sees, has authority over them. The representations of childhood we can find in child psychology and in children's literature thus imply our belief in our own right to power over children even just by existing. These representations, and the disciplines that produce them, are imperialist in essence. Furthermore, I said "he who fixes others in his gaze" deliberately.

In the history of art and in contemporary pin-up photography, it has traditionally been females who are subject to a male gaze, and therefore defined as appropriate subjects to be gazed at—available, passive and yielding to the convenience of detached observers. If the most obvious subject of a male gaze is female, then maleness and femaleness can and do become metaphoric qualities for gazers and gazees who aren't actually male or female: indeed, even oppressors who are actually female tend to describe themselves in language which implies their own aggressive maleness and the passive femaleness of those they oppress, both male and female. For Europeans for whom the Orient is subject to the gaze, it is therefore, metaphorically, female—and that allows Europe to represent itself and its own authority as male. Said describes how "images ... of frank sexual attention to the Orient proliferated" as "scholars, administrators, geographers, and commercial agents poured out their exuberant activity onto the fairly supine, feminine Orient".

The parallel holds here also. Whether male or female, adults often describe their dealings with children in language which manages to suggest something traditionally feminine about childhood, something traditionally masculine about adulthood, and something sexual about adult dealings with children. Scholars, administrators, writers, and teachers—we all pour out exuberant activity onto what we assume are (or ought to be) the fairly supine bodies of children.

We gaze at them and talk about how charming they are in their passive willingness to be gazed at, how cute they are in their endearing efforts to put on a good show for those who observe them. We describe them as intuitive rather than rational, creative rather than practical. And meanwhile, we woo them to our values. We tell them that their true happiness consists in pleasing us, bending to our will, doing what we want. We plant the seeds of our wisdom in them. And we get very angry indeed when they dare to gaze back.

### 3. Inherent Distortion

Obviously, the representation of childhood as perceived by this sort of gaze is a distorted one. Said says, the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' of which it is itself a representation.

As I suggested earlier, then, no representation can be truly objective; the irony is that those who most claim objectivity must be the least trustworthy. "As a judge of the Orient," Said asserts, "the modern Orientalist does not, as he believes and even says, stand apart from it objectively. His human detachment, whose sign is the absence of sympathy covered by professional knowledge, is weighted heavily with all the orthodox attitudes, perspectives, and moods of Orientalism that I have been describing". No matter what claims we make to the contrary, our supposedly objective descriptions of childhood are equally anything but objective, and are similarly permeated with assumptions developed over a number of centuries by a history of adult observation and discussion.

The paradox is that we can claim objectivity for our observations only by being other than what we observe; but in being other, we have no choice but to interpret what we observe in terms of ourselves and our previously established assumptions. Thus, adult interpretation of children's behavior, whether in literature or in psychology, are always contaminated by previously established adult assumptions about childhood. Those assumptions emerge from the discourse about children developed over centuries in order to support the programs of various philosophical and political systems; they are now simply taken for granted as the absolute truth, even by those of us who no longer espouse those systems.

Piaget's notorious habit of always interpreting the results of his experiments in childhood development in terms that underestimated the capabilities of his subjects is a perfect example. He may or may not have shared the specific political concerns or philosophical prejudices that led Locke to assert that childhood thinking was different from and lesser than adult thought; he simply assumed that it was, and then made his results accord with those already existing assumptions of his culture. It has taken later experimenters with different cultural assumptions to reveal how slightly different versions of the same experiments reveal vastly superior capabilities in children.

### 4. Inherently Adult-Centered

Orientalism was and still mostly is a study pursued by Europeans; its representation of the Orient is therefore for the benefit of European interests. As Orientalism is primarily for the benefit of Europeans, child psychology and children's literature are primarily for the benefit of adults. We may claim to study childhood in order to benefit children, but we actually do it so that we will know how to deal with children; and as Rose suggests, we write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves unapproved of or feel comfortable with. By and large, we encourage in children those values and behaviors that make children easier for us to handle: more passive, more docile, more obedient—and thus, more in need of our guidance and more willing to accept the need for it. It's no accident that the vast majority of stories for children share the message that, despite one's dislike of the constraints one feels there, home is still the best, the safest place to be.



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**5. Silencing and Inherent Silence**

In the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it. As long as we keep on speaking for it, we won't get to hear what it has to say for itself- and indeed, that may be exactly why we are speaking in the first place. Said says, "There were-and are-cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West". Similarly, our discourse about childhood often replaces and even prevents our real perception of the brute realities of childhood.

For instance: we produce a children's literature that is almost totally silent on the subject of sexuality, presumably in order to allow ourselves to believe that children truly are as innocent as we claim- that their lives are devoid of sexuality. In doing so, however, we make it difficult for children to speak to us about their sexual concerns: our silence on the subject clearly asserts that we have no wish to hear about it, that we think children with such concerns are abnormal. And if we convince ourselves that they are abnormal, then we render ourselves unable to hear what children are saying even if they do attempt to speak about such matters. The final result of the silencing of the other is that we actually do make it incomprehensible to us. According to Said, The relationship between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard to reach object. Yet the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident. This cultural, temporal, and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise: phrases like "the veils of an Eastern bride" or "the inscrutable Orient" passed into the common language. In other words, the more we say about what we understand, the more we understand that we can't understand. The more we claim to know about childhood, the more we find ourselves insisting on its mysterious otherness-its silence about itself-and the more we feel the need to observe yet more, interpret yet further: to say yet more, and thus, create much more silence for us to worry about and speak about. The adult observation of childhood as an other that does not observe itself is always doomed to fail to understand, and thus, doomed to continue replicating itself forever-or at least until it stops assuming its subject is indeed other. But as long as the study of childhood makes that assumption, it can continue to be a necessary (and dare I suggest, profitable?) pursuit of adults.

**6. Inherent Danger**

Our eternal desire and failure to understand the other confirms something else also-its paradoxical attractiveness and danger to us. That paradox clearly relates to "femaleness"-it is the essence of our traditional discourse about women. Said speaks of "the motif of the Orient as insinuating danger. Rationality is undermined by Eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive opposites to what seem to be normal values". It is because Europeans find themselves attracted to those "excesses" of Orientals that they work to blot them out; they must try to make Orientals more like themselves in order to prevent Orientals from making Europeans more like them, and therefore weakening Europeans.

The parallels in our attitudes to childhood are obvious. What we chose to understand as childlike irrationality or lawlessness or carelessness is attractively lax, a temptation to be less responsible, less mature, less adult. If adults have a secret desire to act childish, and if that dangerous desire is engendered by the childish actions of children, then we must protect ourselves and our world by making children less childish. Our domination of children is for our own good as well as theirs.

**7. The Stability of the Other**

We have just seen how the mere fact of our speaking for what we see as a speechless group merely confirms its continuing silence-merely confirms that it always has been and always will be other than our speaking selves. One of the essential qualities of Orientalism is its insistence across centuries that there is such a thing as "an Oriental mind," a set of basic

characteristics that transcend not only mere individuals but also such minor distinctions as those between Arabs and Asians, or Hinduism and Islam, or Egyptians and Turks, and that the Oriental mind doesn't change significantly despite the passing of time. Said asserts that, "whereas it is no longer possible to write learned (or even popular) disquisitions on either 'the Negro mind' or 'the Jewish personality,' it is perfectly possible to engage in such research as 'the Islamic mind' or 'the Arab character'" (262); indeed, a letter that appeared in my local paper as I was working on this essay insists that "Arab people do not share our modern thinking .... Modern man's striving for progress and the well-being of all people is lacking in the Arabs' social and governing systems" (Winnipeg Free Press, May 26, 1991); I doubt the paper would have published that letter if it had said "Israeli" instead of "Arab." "Childhood" is equally stable in the works of child psychologists, writers of children's fiction, and children's literature specialists.

Just as "the scholarly investigator took a type marked 'Oriental' for the same thing as any individual Oriental he might encounter" (230), Piaget assumed that the few individual Swiss children he studied could accurately represent the inherent cognitive development of all children in all times and all cultures. Contemporary children's literature is filled with images of childhood experience that accord more with Wordsworth's visions of idyllic childhood innocence than with the realities of modern children's lives, and contemporary children's literature journals are filled with the same few generalizations about how all children are creative (unlike most adults), or have limited attention spans (unlike most adults). And we happily assume that it must have been the imaginative bits in medieval or eighteenth century literature that the children in the audience responded to, rather than the religious or moral parts—as if medieval or eighteenth century children were inherently different from their parents, inherently one with the children of contemporary urban agnostic liberals.

The major effects of these "eternal truths" is, obviously, to confirm our own eternal difference from the other. "What the Orientalist does," says Said, "is to confirm the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions". Neither, apparently, do most children's writers and most adult experts in aspects of childhood.

## 8. Power

But why? Why must we continually confirm our limiting assumptions in this way? The answer is simple: power. Knowledge is, quite literally, power. When we talk about mastering a subject, we don't often allow ourselves to see the literal truth of the metaphor: our doing so is truly to subject it to our power.

To know something is to be separate from it, above it, objective about it, and therefore in a position to perceive (or simply invent) the truth about it—to be able, in other words, to act as if what one "knows" is in fact true. Thus, "knowing" that Orientals are different from and therefore inferior to themselves, Europeans have been able to justify their efforts to dominate the East—just as we North Americans continue to use our knowledge of "the Arab mind" to justify our efforts to dominate Iraq. We adults similarly use our knowledge of "childhood" to dominate children. My children's teachers have frequently justified blatantly cruel punishments or deceitfully manipulative uses of group pressure by telling me that children of this particular age or stage cannot possibly possess my subtle moral perceptions, and therefore are not actually being hurt. What would be painful for us is acceptable for them, and allows us to behave toward them as we would not behave towards each other. By and large, children's literature tends to be a more subtle version of the same kind of wielding of adult power. I spoke earlier about the silence of children's literature on the subject of sexuality; indeed, we almost always describe childhood for children in the hope, unconscious or otherwise, that the children will accept our version of their lives. In a famous formulation, Jacqueline Rose suggests that, "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp". In other words, we show children what we "know" about childhood in hopes that they will take our word for it and become like the fictional children we have invented—and therefore, less threatening to us.

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In crude forms, this is simply a matter of providing children stories which ask them to see themselves in and thus accept the moral conclusions reached by child characters they are supposed to, as we say, "identify with." In more subtle novels, as Rose shows, we provide young readers with a "realistic" description of people and events that insist on the reality of one particular way of looking at the world and themselves-our way.

**9. Domination**

Said says, "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered common place by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be-that is, submitted to being-made Oriental". Children do similarly submit to our ideas about what it means to be childish, and do show us the childish behavior we make it clear to them we wish to see, simply because they rarely have the power to do anything else. Exercising power over the weak in this way might well be perceived as an act of bullying. If children are indeed weak enough to be so easily overwhelmed by our power over them, then they are weak enough that our unquestioning willingness to exercise that power in the blind faith that it's good for them implies some moral weakness in ourselves.

**10. Self-Confirming Description**

The fact that Orientals might be "made Oriental"-be manipulated into acting as if they actually are what the outside other sees them as being-suggests the extent to which a discourse of the other can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Said says, "we might expect that the ways by which it is recommended that a lion's fierceness be handled will actually increase its fierceness, force it to be fierce since that is what it is, and that is what in essence we know or can only know about it". If we assume children have short attention spans and therefore never let them try to read long books, they do not in fact read long books. They will seem to us to be incapable of reading long books-and we will see those that do manage to transcend our influence and read long books as atypical, paradoxically freaks in being more like us than like our other. It may well be for this reason that a depressingly large number of children do seem to fit into Piagetian categorizations of childlike behavior, and that an equally large number of children do seem to like the kinds of books that adult experts claim to be the kind of books children like. Indeed, in the current children's book market, driven more and more by the marketing needs of a few major bookstore chains, almost no other kind of book gets published, and therefore few children have any way of discovering if they might indeed like any other kind. Whether or not real children really do share these attitudes, we have provided ourselves with no way of perceiving their behavior as representing anything else.

**11. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

Furthermore, real children do often act as we perceive them to act. The discourse of the other does often manage to absorb the other into its conceptions of otherness. In treating children like children, we may well doom them to a conviction in and inability to transcend their inadequacy.

**12. Other as Opposite**

A century or so ago, the British colonial official Lord Cromer summed up his knowledge of the East by saying, "I content myself with noting the fact that somehow or other the Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European" (Said 39). Or in other words: I define who I am myself as a European by seeing the Oriental as everything I am not. A main purpose of a discourse of the other is always this sort of self definition:

we characterize the other as other in order to define ourselves. "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different,'" says Said; "thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'". Similarly, we adults can see ourselves as rational, virtuous, mature, and normal exactly because we have irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different children to compare ourselves to. We need children to be childlike so that we can understand what maturity is-the opposite of being childlike.

**13. The Other as Inherently Contradictory**

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"For a number of evident reasons the Orient was always in the position both of outsider and of incorporated weak partner for the West" (Said 208). This statement implies an inherent contradiction in the discourse of the other as I've described it thus far, one that's highly significant in discussions of children's literature.

On the one hand, as we've seen, Orientals are the opposite of Europeans, in ways so basic and unchanging that the Oriental mind transcends differences of specific places and times, and always in ways that define European superiority. If there were no more colonies to colonize, imperialists could no longer perceive themselves as being imperial; and so in a very basic sense "Oriental" means "eternally and inalterably opposite to human."

On the other hand, however, as we've also seen, part of the European's superior humanity is a more evolved sense of obligation to others less superior; the strong must colonize the weak in order to help them become stronger, and so, in a very basic sense, "Oriental" means, "a less evolved being with the potential to become human."

A non-human in the process of becoming more human. There is no way of resolving this contradiction: Orientals cannot be both our unchanging opposite and in the process of changing into us. The same contradiction appears in our discourse about children and children's literature, and there is no way of resolving it there either. Instead, we tend to flip-flop, even within single texts, between two contradictory ideas about children and our reasons for writing to or about them.

I learned about this contradiction as I read through a Horn Book that appeared as I was preparing this piece (May/June 1991), looking for evidence of the current status of conventional assumptions about childhood in the journal most likely to represent it. On the one hand, various authors and advertisers told me, "the strength of children's imaginations is such that they can understand what other children are feeling" and "their imaginations make fanciful things become magically real". On the other hand, however, children reading one new book "will begin to look at their surroundings from a new perspective" (inside front cover) and another book "encourages children to look beyond and into". In other words, children are essentially and inherently imaginative, and so we must provide them with books which will teach them how to be imaginative.

In a concise statement of this paradox, one Horn Book writer talks about a book which describes how some children find an inventive use for an impractical gift: "the message in this celebration of play is optimistic. It suggests that children take from their surroundings, no matter how inconsistent or inappropriate, the raw material for imaginative creation". Is this a suggestion in the sense of an evocative description, or in the sense of a recommendation? It seems to be both at once; children need to learn from books by adults how to act like children.

**14. Origin vs. Decline**

How is it that we adults know better than children do how to act like children? Said provides an answer for this, too, as he describes how Orientalists approached their subject: proper knowledge of the Orient proceeded from a thorough study of the classical texts, and only after that to an application of those texts to the modern Orient. Faced with the obvious decrepitude and political impotence of the modern Oriental, the European Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past, classical Oriental grandeur in order to 'facilitate ameliorations' in the present Orient.

The parallel "classical texts" of childhood fall into two categories. First there are written descriptions of children of earlier times, not just the "classic" children's books but also the classic texts of child psychology-Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohlberg. Second, there are our personal versions of our own childhoods: what we identify as childhood memories. Believing that

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these texts describe an ideal childhood-childhood as it ought to be-and perceiving a gulf between this ideal childhood and the real behavior of children we know, we work in literature and life to make children more like the ideal-to restore to them a "childhood" they appear to have lost sight of.

But did we really experience childhood as we claim to remember it' Or have we come to believe we did because we ourselves in both our childhood and our adult lives have also read books by and had interactions with adults who worked to impose their visions of childhood upon us? Perhaps what we call "childhood" is always an imaginative construct of the adult mind, always being moved not only outwards to blind us to our actual perceptions of contemporary children but also backwards into the past, to blind us to our memories of our actual past experiences. Perhaps there never was a childhood as innocent, as creative, as spontaneous as adults like to imagine. Perhaps children are always more like adults than adults are ever able to see.

**15. Circularity**

Children oppressed by adult versions of childhood turn into the adults who oppress other children. Said suggests a similar circularity in the thought of Europeans about Orientals. Since the ancient Orient invented by European scholars is assumed to be the past of Europe as well as of the contemporary Orient, Europeans could assume that they were the true inheritors of that imaginary Oriental past. For instance, European linguists posited an ancient Indo-European of their own invention that evolved into both contemporary Eastern and European languages, then claimed that their own European languages were the natural evolution of Indo-European, the Eastern ones merely degenerate versions of it. This conviction of their own connection to ancient purity not only allowed Europeans to point out the degenerate nature of the modern Orient but also to work to replace it with the truly classical values they themselves represented an evolved version of. Similarly, we adults posit our own imagined childhood as what we must work to persuade contemporary children of.

But in actual fact, Orientals do not turn into Europeans who then oppress a new generation of Oriental. What distinguishes our thinking about childhood from other discourses about otherness is that in this case, the other does quite literally turn into ourselves. All those who survive childhood become adults, adults who tend to think of children as their other. Even those adults who happen to be feminists tend to talk and think of children of both sexes in terms of metaphors redolent of traditional assumptions about feminine weakness and passivity; and those members of oppressed minorities who are most adamant about their own need for freedom from oppression are often among those who are most vociferous about controlling the image of the world presented in children's literature, trying to ensure that children adopt their own correct attitudes. The irony in that is as obvious as it is depressing: if our thinking about children is an act of colonization, then it is in fact ourselves we are colonizing, ourselves we are oppressing-albeit at one remove.

**16. Fixity vs. Process**

Said suggests two contradictory modes by which Europeans address Orientals. One is the evolutionary enterprise of educating them into being more like Europeans; the other is the self-confirming enterprise of educating them into being what Europeans have always imagined Orientals to be-typical representatives of "the Oriental mind." The same contradiction is so central to discourse about children and in children's literature that it might well be their defining characteristic.

On the one hand, we believe that good children's books accurately describe what is often identified as the wonder or spontaneity or creativity of childhood. In other words, they are good because they teach children how to be childlike by providing them with appropriate images of childhood. On the other hand, however, their themes or messages are almost always about becoming less



egocentric, more rational, etc. In other words, they teach children how to be adults. Thus Anne of Green Gables and Harriet the Spy are considered to be good books, first, because they capture the joy of childhood, and second, because they end up by confirming adult ethical concerns. This inherent contradiction, which appears in just about all children's literature, emerges automatically from its being a discourse of the other. Viewed from the perspective of its efforts to colonize, children's literature is essentially and inevitably an attempt to keep children opposite to ourselves and an attempt to make children more like us. It may be exactly that contradiction at its heart that is its most characteristic generic marker.

By now I've persuaded myself that child psychology and children's literature are imperialist activities; I hope I've persuaded you. And most of us at least claim to dislike imperialism. So what should we do about it?' What can we do about it?

We might, of course, attempt to do what Peter Hunt calls "childish" criticism—to think about children and read children's literature from a child's point of view. But in fact, this is merely a deception—another form of allowing ourselves to see and speak for them. Male readers can't really know what it feels like for women to read male-oriented descriptions of women, any more than masculinist authors could avoid producing descriptions of women that were male-oriented in the first place; and no more can we adults read as children, even if we once could. The best we can do in that line is to read as what we imagine children to be—that is, in terms of our adult assumptions. Indeed, because it's our adult attempts to see and speak for children that create children's literature and child psychology in the first place, our attempts to analyze texts in these areas are doomed to inhabit the same discourse as they would be purporting to reveal and criticize.

So again: what can we do? We might simply say that we can't do anything. Theory teaches us that all discourse is in fact a discourse of the other. According to linguists, it's an inherent characteristic of language that any given word can be meaningful only within a field of differences—only by being other than other words. The very act of making meaning requires us both to evoke another (what we don't mean) and to marginalize it (make it less significant than what we do want to say). Furthermore, we wouldn't speak or write if we didn't imagine an other less than ourselves in at least one important way. An audience that doesn't yet know what we wish it to understand. As I do in this essay, we always speak to our audience in an attempt to speak for it—to colonize it with our own perceptions of things, including itself. If our discourse about childhood is imperialist, then, it may not be much more imperialist than any other form of human speech. But that inevitable imperialism might be less dangerous if we were willing to acknowledge it and at least attempt to be aware of it. Orientalism could oppress vast numbers of people exactly by denying that it was oppressive—indeed, by insisting that it was the opposite of oppressive, that it had a high-minded interest in helping others less fortunate than oneself. To be aware of the possible oppressiveness of our supposedly objective or even benevolent truths and assumptions about childhood does not mean that their potential oppressiveness will disappear. But we can at least work on it. We can try to move beyond thinking about individual children as if they did in fact represent some alien other. We can become suspicious of adults who claim to "like children," as if they did indeed share qualities en masse, and we can wonder about the suitability of those who make such claims to become teachers or child psychologists. We can try to see the oppressiveness inherent in our use of concepts such as "the eternal innocence of childhood" or stages of cognitive or moral development. We can try to operate as if the humanity children share with us matters more than their presumed differences from us.

I have to admit it: I find it hard to imagine a world in which children have the right to vote, serve on juries, and control their own destinies. But then I remind myself of all those people in recent history who found it hard to imagine a world in which women or Arabs could do these same things.

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Treating children as if they were really just human beings like the rest of us might have some specific consequences unfortunate for readers of this journal: it might mean the end of something specifically identified as children's literature. It might do us out of a job. But I don't think it will. No matter how hard we try, we aren't ever going to escape the imperialist tendencies at the heart of human discourse. There will always be somebody out there finding a new way to think about children or write about childhood; and the new ways will always inevitably work to impose somebody's ideas of childhood on both other adults and on children. Come to think of it, that's exactly what I'm trying to do here in this essay. The only difference is that I'm trying hard not to allow myself to forget that.

Indeed, not forgetting is the key to useful criticism. Which is to say: we critics of children's literature still have a job to do, and the job is to try to stop forgetting or ignoring or denying the ways in which children's literature is as inherently imperialist as all human discourse tends to be. If it is, then we need to explore how. What claims do specific texts make on the children who read them? How do they represent childhood for children, and why might they be representing it in that way? What interest of adults might the representation be serving? Perhaps above all, how does it work? How does children's literature make its claims on child readers?

What are the strategies by which texts encourage children to accept adult interpretations of their behavior? And can we devise ways of helping children to be more aware of those strategies themselves, to protect themselves from the oppressions of the other? Oh, yes, and one other thing: can we remember always to ask all these questions about our own writing about childhood and children's literature? Can I, for instance, allow myself the humbling embarrassment of suddenly realizing, as I did when I first wrote the last sentence in the preceding paragraph, my own imperial tendencies?. For imperialist they undoubtedly are: in order to combat colonialism, I am recommending a benevolently helpful colonizing attitude towards children.

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Orientalist refers to the ..... .
  - (a) East
  - (b) West
  - (c) South
  - (d) North
- (ii) The magazine article "Who is Afraid of Edward Said" published in ..... .
  - (a) 1999
  - (b) 1989
  - (c) 1995
  - (d) None of these
- (iii) Noam Chomsky was a well-known ..... .
  - (a) Throrist
  - (b) Philosopher
  - (c) Linguist
  - (d) None of these
- (iv) Edward said died in the early morning of September 25, ..... .
  - (a) 2004
  - (b) 2003
  - (c) 2008
  - (d) 2005

**19.6 Summary**

- Orientalism is a term used by art historians, literary and cultural studies scholars for the imitation or depiction of aspects of Middle Eastern, and East Asian cultures (Eastern cultures) by American and European writers, designers and artists.
- In particular, Orientalist painting, depicting more specifically "the Middle East", was one of the many specialisms of 19th century Academic art. Since the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism, the term has arguably acquired a negative connotation.

- Like the term Orient itself Orientalism derives from a Latin word Oriens referring simply to the rising of the sun, to imply "the East" in a relative sense. This is the opposite of the term Occident, which has largely dropped from common usage.
- Similar terms are the French-derived Levant and Anatolia, from the Greek anatole, two further locutions for the direction in which the sun rises.
- In terms of The Old World, Europe was considered to be 'The West' or Occidental, and the furthest known Eastern extremity 'The East' or 'The Orient'.
- From at least the time of the Roman Empire until at least the Middle Ages, what is now considered 'the Middle East' was then considered 'the Orient'. During that period, the flourishing cultures of the Far East were little known, just as Europe was essentially unknown in 'the Far East'.
- Over time, the common understanding of 'the Orient' has continually shifted East as Western explorers traveled deeper into Asia. In Biblical times, the Three Wise Men 'from the Orient' were actually Magi from "The East" (relative to Palestine) meaning 'the Persian Empire'. After all period, as Europe gained knowledge of countries further to the East, the definition of the limit of 'the Orient' progressively shifted eastwards, until the Pacific Ocean was reached, in what is also known as 'the Far East'. This can cause some confusion about the historical and geographic scope of Oriental Studies.
- However, there still remain some contexts where 'the Orient' or 'Oriental' refer to older definitions. For example, 'Oriental Spices' typically come from regions extending from the Middle East through the Indian sub-continent to Indo-China. Also, travel on the Orient Express (from Paris to Istanbul), is eastward bound (towards the sunrise), but does not reach what is currently understood to be the Orient.
- In contemporary English, Oriental is usually a synonym for the peoples, cultures and goods from the parts of East Asia traditionally occupied by East Asians and Southeast Asians, excluding Indians, Arabs and other more westerly peoples.
- In some parts of America it is considered derogatory to use this term to refer to Asians (whether East, South, West or Central Asians). For example, in Washington state it is illegal to use the word 'oriental' in legislation and government documents .

## 19.7 Key-Words

1. The Orient : It signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien ("Other") to the West.
2. Latent Orientalism : It is the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is. Its basic content is static and unanimous. The Orient is seen as separate, eccentric, backward, silently different, sensual, and passive. It has a tendency towards despotism and away from progress. It displays feminine penetrability and supine malleability. Its progress and value are judged in terms of, and in comparison to, the West, so it is always the Other, the conquerable, and the inferior.
3. Manifest Orientalism : It is what is spoken and acted upon. It includes information and changes in knowledge about the Orient as well as policy decisions founded in Orientalist thinking. It is the expression in words and actions of Latent Orientalism.

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### 19.8 Review Questions

1. What is meant by Orientalism? Discuss.
2. Discuss the two types of orientalism.
3. What is the difference between latent and manifest orientalism?
4. Discuss orientalism as a literary theory.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (a)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (b)

### 19.9 Further Readings



*Books*

1. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC, and Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
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3. Brief, Jean-Claude. *Beyond Piaget: A Philosophical Psychology*. New York: Teachers College, 1983.
4. Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan: or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1984.
5. Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
6. Siegel, Linda S., and Charles J. Brainerd, ed. *Alternatives to Piaget: Critical Essays on the Theory*. New York: Academic, 1978.
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## Unit 20: Edward Said's Crisis [In Orientalism]: Textual Analysis

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Orientalism.
- Discuss Textual Analysis, Edward Said's Crisis.

### Introduction

Edward Said is a Palestinian, who was educated in Palestine and Egypt when those countries were under British jurisdiction, and subsequently in the United States. He is Parr Professor of English and Cooperative Literature at Columbia University, New York. Said's first book was critical study of Conrad, Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (1966), that took a phenomenological approach to its subject, but was recognizably within the tradition of Anglo-American 'New Criticism'. Said was one of the first critics in America to respond to the challenge of European structuralist and post-structuralist theory, and his thoughtful, sometimes anxious reflections upon these developments may be traced in his books Beginnings (1975) and The World, the Text and the Critic (1983). Said has disliked the increasing hermiticism of deconstructive criticism, and has been drawn to Marxist and Foucauldian analyses of literature and culture as sites of political and ideological struggle. In *Orientalism* (1978) he found a rewarding subject for such an approach, and, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he examined his earlier premises in relation to the Western canon. *Orientalism* is the discourse of the West about the East, a huge body of texts – literary, topographical, anthropological, historical, sociological – that has been accumulating since the Renaissance. Said, concentrating his attention on writing about the Near East, is concerned to show how this discourse is at once self-validating, constructing certain stereotypes which become accepted as self-evident facts, and also in conscious or unconscious collusion with political and economic imperialism. 'Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point,' says Said, in the introduction to his book, 'Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, setting it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.' Said is uniquely qualified to undertake such a study, and *Orientalism* impressively combines political passion with wide-ranging scholarship. The following extract, called simply 'Crisis' in the original text, conclude the first section of the book, entitled 'The Scope of Orientalism'.



## 20.1 Orientalism

This work focuses on the binary: Orient vs. Occident or simply put East vs. West. Said concentrates on the images and ideas of the Orient that are at the forefront of Western thought on the region. Said believes that scholars and artists in the West failed to accurately describe the people, environment, and the culture of the Orient. Rather than describe the Orient with fairness and accuracy, these people, instead prescribed the qualities that the West would prefer to the Orient. This would allow the people from the West viewing the Orient to define themselves by giving the people in the Orient qualities which were considered inferior. Said illustrates this in the following:

"The Orient was almost a place of European invention, and have been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. [...] The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other".

Another problem Said has with the way that the colonial relationship between the West and the Orient is the view of the West as one homogenous entity. Just as there are many groups of people, cultures, nations lumped together into the term 'East' or 'Orient', the West is also being viewed as having one culture, perspective, viewpoint. In the following Said's opinion on this subject comes out:

"I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural identities-to say nothing of historical identities-such as locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West".

The key to Said's Orientalism is the understanding that any ideas of the East, or West, are man made. They are products of the imaginations of generations of people and are not necessarily grounded in reality.

Heart of Darkness works well to explain Said's theories because we are only given the view of Africa from the point of view of Marlow, a Westerner. In other words, we are relying on a person, whose perspective cannot be relied on, to give the description of Africa as he travels down the Congo River. From this point of view comes the justification for colonization: they are godless, barbaric people and we will be doing them a great service by enlightening these people to our better society. This is not explicitly stated in the novella; however, this point of view can be seen behind most imperial justifications.

Said believes that Conrad presents the character Marlow as reinforcing the imperialist perspective because, quite simply, there was not another option available to the author writing in the late nineteenth century. Conrad was also limited in how he could present the novella to the audience at the time. "Heart of Darkness cannot just be a straightforward recital of Marlow's adventures: it is also a dramatization of Marlow himself, the former wanderer in colonial regions, telling his story to a group of British listeners at a particular time and in a specific place". The key word in that quote is "dramatization". This is what Said believes that all depictions of the Orient, as well as the Occident, are simply embellished for dramatic effect or financial gain.

Said believes that two "visions" emerge from the book Heart of Darkness. The first view is that colonialism is still occurring in the world today. The former colonial powers have retained authority in region formerly known as colonies. As Said states, "Westerners may have physically led their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually. 'Show me the Zulu Tolstoy', as one American intellectual has recently put it". The second "vision" that emerges from Heart of Darkness is that of colonialism being of a specific time and place and like all other forms of government or rule would eventually come to an end. Said describes this vision below:

Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end. But come to an end it would, if only because-like all human effort, like speech itself- it would have its moment, then it would have to pass (Said, 375).

These two "visions" are not reconciled in the essay presented in our text book Modern Literary Theory, Said has left this up for the reader of post-colonial literature to decide.

## 20.2 Edward Said's Crisis

Edward Said's essay "Crisis (in Orientalism)" investigates the portrayals of Orientals within writing and as a people, through studying various works he unlocks the misconceptions made in Western culture. In his essay, "Crisis (in Orientalism)" Edward Said studies and critiques the placement of Orientals in literature and outside of it, arguing the powerfulness of misinterpretations and stereotype. He begins his essay by offering an analysis on texts, what makes a text empowering and how an author can create a falsity through character construction. Early in the essay Said offers a fun analogy of a "fierce lion" which acts as a decoder for the remainder of his essay. While the text is extremely readable and not as challenging as previous works, it is difficult at some points to uncover his position. Said cites authors who write on the Oriental who he claim are racist (Friedrich Schlegel), thought-provoking (Anwar Abdel Malek) and frank (Gustave Flaubert). His argument seems to be that there is an impossibility to having a true Oriental work or character. Western writers, he argues, have glossed over the Oriental with stereotypes, misreadings, and bias.

Midway through the essay, Said proposes a metaphorical bin to which Oriental works are placed. One sentence in particular creates a dichotomy of what is in the bin and what is outside of it as a struggle between Western and Oriental tradition, "It is as if, on the one hand, a bin called 'Oriental' existed into which all the authoritative, anonymous, and traditional Western attitudes to the East were dumped unthinkingly, while on the other, true to the anecdotal tradition of storytelling, one could nevertheless tell of experiences with or in the Orient that had so little to do with the generally serviceable bin". By using the terms authoritative and anonymous to describe Western culture, Said suggests an unbalanced validity and secrecy of the dominant attitude toward the Oriental. Also, the use of anecdotal tradition reminded me of Walter Benjamin's argument of oral tradition versus the use of text and how that was a struggle between a dominant and secondary source. On the other side (or, outside the "serviceable bin) of Western tradition, the Oriental use of storytelling wasn't as prevalent in comparison. Benjamin asserted a sense of power to anecdotal storytelling, likewise Said uses it as a form of comparison to the West.

While unexpected, Said's reference to Disney-Walt Disney, Disneyism, Disneyland-caused me to reread that portion to understand its meaning more clearly. Before making the comparison to Said and Orientals, I used Disney films as a reference point. Films such as Pocahontas, Aladdin, and Mulan all represent racial minorities through the Western lens. While they announce a true and accurate representation, most of the films feature stereotypes in colorful form. Said's assertion of this that "Orientals have never understood the meaning of self-government the way 'we' do" seems to imply a paternalistic attitude toward non-Western ideals. The third time he uses Disney, however, ("Disneyland") implies something different, "Please take all your ideas about a left and a right wing, revolutions, and change back to Disneyland" . The tone of this sentence is different because of its implication that by having these ideas, the person is considered childish. While Disney is referential to many things-films, songs, Walt Disney, characters-Disneyland is a specialized as a place. Children go there, people who've yet to intellectually challenge, critique, and understand the world. Said's use of sarcasm also concedes that the people who believe in change and revolutions are reverted back to child-like patterns of thinking.

### 20.3 Textual Analysis

It may appear strange to speak about something or someone as holding a textual attitude, but a student of literature will understand the phrase more easily if he will recall the kind of view attacked by Voltaire in *Candide*, or even the attitude to reality satirized by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. What seems unexceptionable good sense to these writers is that it is a fallacy to assume that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books -- texts -- say; to apply what one learns out of a book literally to reality is to risk folly or ruin. One would no more think of using *Amadis of Gaul* to understand sixteenth-century (or present-day) Spain than one would use the Bible to understand, say, the House of Commons. But clearly people have tried and do try to use texts in so simple-minded a way, for otherwise *Candide* and *Don Quixote* would not still have the appeal for readers that they do today. It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human. But is this failing constantly present, or are there circumstances that, more than others, make the textual attitude likely to prevail?

Two situations favor a textual attitude. One is when a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant. In such a case one has recourse not only to what in one's previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it. Travel books or guidebooks are about as 'natural' a kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, as any book one can think of, precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity. Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it wasn't what a book said it would be. And of course many writers of travel books or guidebooks compose them in order to say that a country is like this, or better, that it is colorful, expensive, interesting, and so forth. The idea in either case is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes. The comedy of Fabrice del Dongo's search for the battle of Waterloo is not so much that he fails to find the battle, but that he looks for it as something texts have told him about.

A second situation favoring the textual attitude is the appearance of success. If one reads a book claiming that lions are fierce and then encounters a fierce lion (I simplify, of course), the chances are that one will be encouraged to read more books by that same author, and believe them. But if, in addition, the lion book instructs one how to deal with a fierce lion, and the instructions work perfectly, then not only will the author be greatly believed, he will also be impelled to try his hand at other kinds of written performance. There is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers' experiences. A book on how to handle a fierce lion might then cause a series of books to be produced on such subjects as the fierceness of lions, the origins of fierceness, and so forth. Similarly, as the focus of the text centers more narrowly on the subject -- no longer lions but their fierceness -- we might expect that the ways by which it is recommended that a lion's fierceness be handled will actually increase its fierceness, force it to be fierce since that is what it is, and that is what in essence we know or can only know about it.

A text purporting to contain knowledge about something actual, and arising out of circumstances similar to the ones I have just described, is not easily dismissed. Expertise is attributed to it. The authority of academics, institutions, and governments can accrue to it, surrounding it with still greater prestige than its practical successes warrant. Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it. This kind of text is composed out of those pre-existing units of information deposited by Flaubert in the catalogue of *idées reçues*. In the light of all this, consider Napoleon and de Lesseps.

Everything they knew, more or less, about the Orient came from books written in the tradition of Orientalism, placed in its library of *idées reçues*; for them the Orient, like the fierce lion, was something to be encountered and dealt with to a certain extent because the texts made that Orient possible. Such an Orient was silent, available to Europe for the realization of projects that involved but were never directly responsible to the native inhabitants, and unable to resist the projects, images, or mere descriptions devised for it. Earlier I called such a relation between Western writing (and its consequences) and Oriental silence the result of and the sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient. But there is another side to the strength, a side whose existence depends on the pressures of the orientalist tradition and its textual attitude to the Orient; this side lives its own life, as books about fierce lions will do until lions can talk back. The perspective rarely drawn on by Napoleon and de Lesseps -- to take two among the many projectors who hatched plans for the Orient -- is the one that sees them carrying on in the dimensionless silence of the Orient mainly because the discourse of Orientalism, over and above the Orient's powerlessness to do anything about them, suffused their activity with meaning, intelligibility, and reality. The discourse of Orientalism and what made it possible -- in Napoleon's case, a West far more powerful militarily than the Orient -- gave them Orientals who could be described in such works as the *Description de l'Égypte* and an Orient that could be cut across as de Lesseps cut across Suez. Moreover, Orientalism gave them their success -- at least from their point of view, which had nothing to do with that of the Oriental. Success, in other words, had all the actual human interchange between Oriental and Westerner of the judge's 'said I to myself, said I' in *Trial by Jury*. Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises. For if it is true that historians like Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt emplot their narratives 'as a story of a particular kind',<sup>1</sup> the same is also true of Orientalists who plotted Oriental history, character, and destiny for hundreds of years. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Orientalists became a more serious quantity, because by then the reaches of imaginative and actual geography had shrunk, because the Oriental-European relationship was determined by an unstoppable European expansion in search of markets, resources, and colonies, and finally, because Orientalism had accomplished its self-metamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution. Evidence of this metamorphosis is already apparent in what I have said of Napoleon, de Lesseps, Balfour, and Cromer. Their projects in the Orient are understandable on only the most rudimentary level as the efforts of men of vision and genius, heroes in Carlyle's sense. In fact Napoleon, de Lesseps, Cromer, and Balfour are far more regular, far less unusual, if we recall the schemata of d'Herbelot and Dante and add to them both a modernized, efficient engine (like the nineteenth-century European empire) and a positive twist: since one cannot ontologically obliterate the Orient (as d'Herbelot and Dante perhaps realized), one does have the means to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it. The point I am trying to make here is that the transition from a merely textual apprehension, formulation, or definition of the Orient to the putting of all this into practice in the Orient did take place, and that Orientalism had much to do with that -- if I may use the word in a literal sense -- preposterous transition. So far as its strictly scholarly work was concerned (and I find the idea of strictly scholarly work as disinterested and abstract hard to understand: still, we can allow it intellectually), Orientalism did a great many things. During its great age in the nineteenth century it produced scholars; it increased the number of languages taught in the West and the quantity of manuscripts edited, translated, and commented on; in many cases, it provided the Orient with sympathetic European students, genuinely interested in such matters as Sanskrit grammar, Phoenician numismatics, and Arabic poetry. Yet -- and here we must be very clear -- Orientalism overrode the Orient. As a system of thought about the Orient, it always rose from the specifically human detail to the general transhuman one; an observation about a tenth-century Arab poet multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the Oriental mentality in Egypt, Iraq, or Arabia. Similarly a verse from the Koran would be considered the best evidence of an ineradicable Muslim sensuality. Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient, absolutely different (the reasons change from epoch to epoch) from the West. And Orientalism, in its post-eighteenth-century form, could never revise itself. All this makes Cromer and Balfour, as observers and administrators of the Orient, inevitable. The closeness between politics and Orientalism, or to put

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it more circumspectly, the great likelihood that ideas about the Orient drawn from Orientalism can be put to political use, is an important yet extremely sensitive truth. It raises questions about the predisposition towards innocence or guilt, scholarly disinterest or pressure-group complicity, in such fields as black or women's studies. It necessarily provokes unrest in one's conscience about cultural, racial, or historical generalizations, their uses, value, degree of objectivity, and fundamental intent. More than anything else, the political and cultural circumstances in which Western Orientalism has flourished draw attention to the debased position of the Orient or Oriental as an object of study. Can any other than a political master--slave relation produce the Orientalized Orient perfectly characterized by Anwar Abdel Malek?

1. On the level of the position of the problem, and the problematic . . . the Orient and Orientals [are considered by Orientalism] as an 'object' of study, stamped with an otherness -- as all that is different, whether it be 'subject' or 'object' -- but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character. . . . This 'object' of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a 'historical' subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, nonsovereign with regard to itself: the only Orient or Oriental or 'subject' which could be admitted, at the extreme limit, is the alienated being, philosophically, that is, other than itself in relationship to itself, posed, understood, defined -- and acted -- by others.
2. On the level of the thematic, [the Orientalists] adopt an essentialist conception of the countries, nations and peoples of the Orient under study, a conception which expresses itself through a characterized ethnist typology . . . and will soon proceed with it towards racism.

According to the traditional orientalists, an essence should exist - sometimes even clearly described in metaphysical terms -- which constitutes the inalienable and common basis of all the beings considered; this essence is both 'historical,' since it goes back to the dawn of history, and fundamentally a-historical, since it transfixes the being, 'the object' of study, within its inalienable and non-evolutive specificity, instead of defining it as all other beings, states, nations, peoples, and cultures -- as a product, a resultant of the ejection of the forces operating in the field of historical evolution.

Thus one ends with a typology -- based on a real specificity, but detached from history, and, consequently, conceived as being intangible, essential - which makes of the studied 'object' another being with regard to whom the studying subject is transcendent; we will have a homo Sinicus, a homo Arabicus (and why not a homo Aegypticus, etc.), a homo Africanus, the man -- the 'normal man,' it is understood -- being the European man of the historical period, that is, since Greek antiquity. One sees how much, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the hegemonism of possessing minorities, unveiled by Marx and Engels, and the anthropocentrism dismantled by Freud are accompanied by europocentrism in the area of human and social sciences, and more particularly in those in direct relationship with non-European peoples. Abdel Malek sees Orientalism as having a history which, according to the 'Oriental' of the late twentieth century, led it to the impasse described above. Let us now briefly outline that history as it proceeded through the nineteenth century to accumulate weight and power, 'the hegemonism of possessing minorities', and anthropocentrism in alliance with Europocentrism. From the last decades of the eighteenth century and for at least a century and a half, Britain and France dominated Orientalism as a discipline. The great philological discoveries in comparative grammar made by Jones, Franz Bopp, Jakob Grimm, and others were originally indebted to manuscripts brought from the East to Paris and London. Almost without exception, every Orientalist began his career as a philologist, and the revolution in philology that produced Bopp, Sacy, Burnouf, and their students was a comparative science based on the premise that languages belong to families, of which the Indo-European and the Semitic are two great instances. From the outset, then, Orientalism carried forward two traits:

1. a newly found scientific self-consciousness based on the linguistic importance of the Orient to Europe, and
2. a proclivity to divide, subdivide, and redivide its subject matter without ever changing its mind about the Orient as being always the same, unchanging, uniform and radically peculiar object.



Friedrich Schlegel, who learned his Sanskrit in Paris, illustrates these traits together. Although by the time he published his *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* [On the Language and Wisdom of India] in 1808 Schlegel had practically renounced his Orientalism, he still held that Sanskrit and Persian on the one hand and Greek and German on the other had more affinities with each other than with the Semitic, Chinese, American, or African languages. Moreover, the Indo-European family was artistically simple and satisfactory in a way the Semitic, for one, was not. Such abstractions as this did not trouble Schlegel, for whom nations, races, minds, and peoples as things one could talk about passionately -- in the ever-narrowing perspective of populism first adumbrated by Herder -- held a lifelong fascination. Yet nowhere does Schlegel talk about the living, contemporary Orient. When he said in 1800, 'It is in the Orient that we must search for the highest Romanticism,' he meant the Orient of the *Sakuntala*, the *Zend-Avesta*, and the *Upanishads*. As for the Semites, whose language was agglutinative, unaesthetic, and mechanical, they were different, inferior, backward. Schlegel's lectures on language and on life, history, and literature are full of these discriminations, which he made without the slightest qualification. Hebrew, he said, was made for prophetic utterance and divination; the Muslims, however, espoused a 'dead empty Theism, a merely negative Unitarian faith.'

Much of the racism in Schlegel's strictures upon the Semites and other 'low' Orientals was widely diffused in European culture. But nowhere else, unless it be later in the nineteenth century among Darwinian anthropologists and phrenologists, was it made the basis of a scientific subject matter as it was in comparative linguistics or philology. Language and race seemed inextricably tied, and the 'good' Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the 'bad' Orient lingered in present-day Asia, parts of North Africa, and Islam everywhere. 'Aryans' were confined to Europe and the ancient Orient; as Léon Poliakov has shown (without once remarking, however, that 'Semites' were not only the Jews but the Muslims as well), the Aryan myth dominated historical and cultural anthropology at the expense of the 'lesser' peoples. The official intellectual genealogy of Orientalism would certainly include Gobineau, Renan, Humboldt, Steinthal, Burnouf, Remusat, Palmer, Weil, Dozy, Muir, to mention a few famous names almost at random from the nineteenth century. It would also include the diffusive capacity of learned societies: the *Société asiatique*, founded in 1822; the *Royal Asiatic Society*, founded in 1823; the *American Oriental Society*, founded in 1842; and so on. But it might perforce neglect the great contribution of imaginative and travel literature, which strengthened the divisions established by Orientalists between the various geographical, temporal, and racial departments of the Orient. Such neglect would be incorrect, since for the Islamic Orient this literature is especially rich and makes a significant contribution to building the Orientalist discourse. It includes work by Goethe, Hugo, Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Kinglake, Nerval, Flaubert, Lane, Burton, Scott, Byron, Vigny, Disraeli, George Eliot, Gautier. Later, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we could add Doughty, Barrès, Loti, T. E. Lawrence, Forster. All these writers give a bolder outline to Disraeli's 'great Asiatic mystery'. In this enterprise there is considerable support not only from the unearthing of dead Oriental civilizations (by European excavators) in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey, but also from major geographical surveys done all through the Orient. By the end of the nineteenth century these achievements were materially abetted by the European occupation of the entire Near Orient (with the exception of parts of the Ottoman Empire, which was swallowed up after 1918). The principal colonial powers once again were Britain and France, although Russia and Germany played some role as well. 5 To colonize meant at first the identification -- indeed, the creation -- of interests; these could be commercial, communicational, religious, military, cultural. With regard to Islam and the Islamic territories, for example, Britain felt that it had legitimate interests, as a Christian power, to safeguard. A complex apparatus for tending these interests developed. Such early organizations as the *Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* (1698) and the *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (1701) were succeeded and later abetted by the *Baptist Missionary Society* (1792), the *Church Missionary Society* (1799), the *British and Foreign Bible Society* (1804), the *London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews* (1808). These missions 'openly joined the expansion of Europe'. 6 Add to these the trading societies, learned societies, geographical exploration funds, translation funds, the implantation in the Orient of schools, missions, consular offices, factories, and sometimes large European communities, and

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the notion of an 'interest' will acquire a good deal of sense. Thereafter interests were defended with much zeal and expense. So far my outline is a gross one. What of the typical experiences and emotions that accompany both the scholarly advances of Orientalism and the political conquests aided by Orientalism?

First, there is disappointment that the modern Orient is not at all like the texts. Here is Gérard de Nerval writing to Théophile Gautier at the end of August 1843: I have already lost, Kingdom after Kingdom, province after province, the more beautiful half, of the universe, and soon I will know of no place in which I can find a refuge for my dreams; but it is Egypt that I most regret having driven out of my imagination, now that I have sadly placed it in my memory. This is by the author of a great *Voyage en Orient*. Nerval's lament is a common topic of Romanticism (the betrayed dream, as described by Albert Béguin in *L'Âme romantique et le rêve* [The Romantic Spirit and the Dream]) and of travelers in the Biblical Orient, from Chateaubriand to Mark Twain. Any direct experience of the mundane Orient ironically comments on such valorizations of it as were to be found in Goethe's 'Mahometsgesang' or Hugo's 'Adieux de l'hôtesse arabe'. Memory of the modern Orient disputes imagination, sends one back to the imagination as a place preferable, for the European sensibility, to the real Orient. For a person who has never seen the Orient, Nerval once said to Gautier, a lotus is still a lotus; for me it is only a kind of onion. To write about the modern Orient is either to reveal an upsetting demystification of images culled from texts, or to confine oneself to the Orient of which Hugo spoke in his original preface to *Les Orientales*, the Orient as 'image' or 'pensée,' symbols of 'une sorte de préoccupation générale [a kind of general preoccupation].' If personal disenchantment and general preoccupation fairly map the Orientalist sensibility at first, they entail certain other more familiar habits of thought, feeling, and perception. The mind learns to separate a general apprehension of the Orient from a specific experience of it; each goes its separate way, so to speak. In Scott novel *The Talisman* (1825), Sir Kenneth (of the Crouching Leopard) battles a single Saracen to a standoff somewhere in the Palestinian desert; as the Crusader and his opponent, who is Saladin in disguise, later engage in conversation, the Christian discovers his Muslim antagonist to be not so bad a fellow after all. Yet he remarks:

I well thought . . . that your blinded race had their descent from the foul fiend, without whose aid you would never have been able to maintain this blessed land of Palestine against so many valiant soldiers of God. I speak not thus of thee in particular, Saracen, but generally of thy people and religion. Strange is it to me, however, not that you should have the descent from the Evil One, but that you should boast of it. For indeed the Saracen does boast of tracing his race's line back to Eblis, the Muslim Lucifer. But what is truly curious is not the feeble historicism by which Scott makes the scene 'medieval', letting Christian attack Muslim theologically in a way nineteenth-century Europeans would not (they would, though); rather, it is the airy condescension of damning a whole people 'generally' while mitigating the offense with a cool 'I don't mean you in particular.'

Scott, however, was no expert on Islam (although H. A. R. Gibb, who was, praised *The Talisman* for its insight into Islam and Saladin), and he was taking enormous liberties with Eblis's role by turning him into a hero for the faithful. Scott's knowledge probably came from Byron and Beckford, but it is enough for us here to note how strongly the general character ascribed to things Oriental could withstand both the rhetorical and the existential force of obvious exceptions. It is as if, on the one hand, a bin called 'Oriental' existed into which all the authoritative, anonymous, and traditional Western attitudes to the East were dumped unthinkingly, while on the other, true to the anecdotal tradition of storytelling, one could nevertheless tell of experiences with or in the Orient that had little to do with the generally serviceable bin. But the very structure of Scott's prose shows a closer intertwining of the two than that. For the general category in advance offers the specific instance a limited terrain in which to operate: no matter how deep the specific exception, no matter how much a single Oriental can escape the fences placed around him, he is first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental.

So general a category as 'Oriental' is capable of quite interesting variations. Disraeli's enthusiasm for the Orient appeared first during a trip East in 1831. In Cairo he wrote, 'My eyes and mind yet ache with a grandeur so little in unison with our own likeness.'<sup>11</sup> General grandeur and passion inspired a transcendent sense of things and little patience for actual reality. His novel *Tancred* is

steeped in racial and geographical platitudes; everything is a matter of race, Sidonia states, so much so that salvation can only be found in the Orient and amongst its races. There, as a case in point, Druzes, Christians, Muslims, and Jews hobnob easily because -- someone quips -- Arabs are simply Jews on horseback, and all are Orientals at heart. The unisons are made between general categories, not between categories and what they contain. An Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life of Oriental ease, in a state of Oriental despotism and sensuality, imbued with a feeling of Oriental fatalism. Writers as different as Marx, Disraeli, Burton, and Nerval could carry on a lengthy discussion between themselves, as it were, using all those generalities unquestioningly and yet intelligibly. With disenchantment and a generalized -- not to say schizophrenic -- view of the Orient, there is usually another peculiarity. Because it is made into a general object, the whole Orient can be made to serve as an illustration of a particular form of eccentricity. Although the individual Oriental cannot shake or disturb the general categories that make sense of his oddness, his oddness can nevertheless be enjoyed for its own sake. Here, for example, is Flaubert describing the spectacle of the Orient:

To amuse the crowd, Mohammed Ali's jester took a woman in a Cairo bazaar one day, set her on the counter of a shop, and coupled with her publicly while the shopkeeper calmly smoked his pipe. On the road from Cairo to Shubra some time ago a young fellow had himself publicly bugged by a large monkey -- as in the story above, to create a good opinion of himself and make people laugh. A marabout died a while ago -- an idiot -- who had long passed as a saint marked by God; all the Moslem women came to see him and masturbated him -- in the end he died of exhaustion -- from morning to night it was a perpetual jacking-off. . . .

Quid dicis [what say you?] of the following fact: some time ago a santon (ascetic priest) used to walk through the streets of Cairo completely naked except for a cap on his head and another on his prick. To piss he would doff the prick-cap, and sterile women who wanted children would run up, put themselves under the parabola of his urine and rub themselves with it. Flaubert frankly acknowledges that this is grotesquerie of a special kind. 'All the old comic business' -- by which Flaubert meant the well-known conventions of 'the cudged slave . . . the coarse trafficker in women . . . the thieving merchant' -- acquire a new, 'fresh . . . genuine and charming' meaning in the Orient. This meaning cannot be reproduced; it can only be enjoyed on the spot and 'brought back' very approximately.

The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the *Description de l'Égypte* called 'bizarre jouissance'. The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness. And this tableau quite logically becomes a special topic for texts. Thus the circle is completed; from being exposed as what texts do not prepare one for, the Orient can return as something one writes about in a disciplined way. Its foreignness can be translated, its meanings decoded, its hostility tamed; yet the generality assigned to the Orient, the disenchantment that one feels after encountering it, the unresolved eccentricity it displays, are all redistributed in what is said or written about it. Islam, for example, was typically Oriental for Orientalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Carl Becker argued that although 'Islam' (note the vast generality) inherited the Hellenic tradition, it could neither grasp nor employ the Greek, humanistic tradition; moreover, to understand Islam one needed above all else to see it, not as an 'original' religion, but as a sort of failed Oriental attempt to employ Greek philosophy without the creative inspiration that we find in Renaissance Europe. For Louis Massignon, perhaps the most renowned and influential of modern French Orientalists, Islam was a systematic rejection of the Christian incarnation, and its greatest hero was not Mohammed or Averroës but al-Hallaj, a Muslim saint who was crucified by the orthodox Muslims for having dared to personalize Islam. What Becker and Massignon explicitly left out of their studies was the eccentricity of the Orient, which they backhandedly acknowledged by trying so hard to regularize it in Western terms. Mohammed was thrown out, but al-Hallaj was made prominent because he took himself to be a Christ-figure. As a judge of the Orient, the modern Orientalist does not, as he believes and even says, stand apart from it objectively. His human detachment, whose sign is the absence of sympathy covered by professional knowledge, is

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weighted heavily with all the orthodox attitudes, perspectives, and moods of Orientalism that I have been describing. His Orient is not the Orient as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized. An unbroken arc of knowledge and power connects the European or Western statesman and the Western Orientalists; it forms the rim of the stage containing the Orient. By the end of World War I both Africa and the Orient formed not so much an intellectual spectacle for the West as a privileged terrain for it. The scope of Orientalism exactly matched the scope of empire, and it was this absolute unanimity between the two that provoked the only crisis in the history of Western thought about and dealings with the Orient. And this crisis continues now. Beginning in the twenties, and from one end of the Third World to the other, the response to empire and imperialism has been dialectical. By the time of the Bandung Conference in 1955 the entire Orient had gained its political independence from the Western empires and confronted a new configuration of imperial powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Unable to recognize 'its' Orient in the new Third World, Orientalism now faced a challenging and politically armed Orient. Two alternatives opened before Orientalism. One was to carry on as if nothing had happened. The second was to adapt the old ways to the new. But to the Orientalist, who believes the Orient never changes, the new is simply the old betrayed by new, misunderstanding dis-Orientalists (we can permit ourselves the neologism). A third, revisionist alternative, to dispense with Orientalism altogether, was considered by only a tiny minority.

One index of the crisis, according to Abdel Malek, was not simply that 'national liberation movements in the ex-colonial' Orient worked havoc with Orientalist conceptions of passive, fatalistic 'subject races'; there was in addition the fact that 'specialists and the public at large became aware of the time-lag, not only between orientalist science and the material under study, but also -- and this was to be determining -- between the conceptions, the methods and the instruments of work in the human and social sciences and those of orientalism. The Orientalists -- from Renan to Goldziher to Macdonald to von Grunebaum, Gibb, and Bernard Lewis -- saw Islam, for example, as a 'cultural synthesis' (the phrase is P. M. Holt's) that could be studied apart from the economics, sociology, and politics of the Islamic peoples. For Orientalism, Islam had a meaning which, if one were to look for its most succinct formulation, could be found in Renan's first treatise: in order best to be understood Islam had to be reduced to 'tent and tribe'. The impact of colonialism, of worldly circumstances, of historical development: all these were to Orientalists as flies to wanton boys, killed -- or disregarded -- for their sport, never taken seriously enough to complicate the essential Islam. The career of H. A. R. Gibb illustrates within itself the two alternative approaches by which Orientalism has responded to the modern Orient. In 1945 Gibb delivered the Haskell Lectures at the University of Chicago. The world he surveyed was not the same one Balfour and Cromer knew before World War I. Several revolutions, two world wars, and innumerable economic, political, and social changes made the realities of 1945 an unmistakably, even cataclysmically, new object. Yet we find Gibb opening the lectures he called *Modern Trends in Islam* as follows:

The student of Arabic civilization is constantly brought up against the striking contrast between the imaginative power displayed, for example, in certain branches of Arabic literature and the literalism, the pedantry, displayed in reasoning and exposition, even when it is devoted to these same productions. It is true that there have been great philosophers among the Muslim peoples and that some of them were Arabs, but they were rare exceptions. The Arab mind, whether in relation to the outer world or in relation to the processes of thought, cannot throw off its intense feeling for the separateness and the individuality of the concrete events. This is, I believe, one of the main factors lying behind that 'lack of a sense of law' which Professor Macdonald regarded as the characteristic difference in the Oriental.

It is this, too, which explains -- what is so difficult for the Western student to grasp [until it is explained to him by the Orientalist] -- the aversion of the Muslims from the thought-processes of rationalism. . . . The rejection of rationalist modes of thought and of the utilitarian ethic which is inseparable from them has its roots, therefore, not in the so-called 'obscurantism' of the Muslim



theologians but in the atomism and discreteness of the Arab imagination. This is pure Orientalism, of course, but even if one acknowledges the exceeding knowledge of institutional Islam that characterizes the rest of the book, Gibb's inaugural biases remain a formidable obstacle for anyone hoping to understand modern Islam. What is the meaning of 'difference' when the preposition 'from' has dropped from sight altogether? Are we not once again being asked to inspect the Oriental Muslim as if his world, unlike ours -- 'differently' from it -- had never ventured beyond the seventh century? As for modern Islam itself, despite the complexities of his otherwise magisterial understanding of it, why must it be regarded with so implacable a hostility as Gibb's? If Islam is flawed from the start by virtue of its permanent disabilities, the Orientalist will find himself opposing any Islamic attempts to reform Islam, because, according to his views, reform is a betrayal of Islam: this is exactly Gibb's argument. How can an Oriental slip out from these manacles into the modern world except by repeating with the Fool in *King Lear*, 'They'll have me whipp'd for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipp'd for lying; and sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace.' Eighteen years later Gibb faced an audience of English compatriots, only now he was speaking as the director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard. His topic was 'Area Studies Reconsidered', in which, among other aperçus, he agreed that 'the Orient is much too important to be left to the Orientalists'. The new, or second alternative, approach open to Orientalists was being announced, just as *Modern Trends* exemplified the first, or traditional, approach. Gibb's formula is well-intentioned in 'Area Studies Reconsidered', so far, of course, as the Western experts on the Orient are concerned, whose job it is to prepare students for careers 'in public life and business.' What we now need, said Gibb, is the traditional Orientalist plus a good social scientist working together: between them the two will do 'interdisciplinary' work. Yet the traditional Orientalist will not bring outdated knowledge to bear on the Orient; no, his expertise will serve to remind his uninitiated colleagues in area studies that 'to apply the psychology and mechanics of Western political institutions to Asian or Arab situations is pure Walt Disney'.

In practice this notion has meant that when Orientals struggle against colonial occupation, you must say (in order not to risk a Disneyism) that Orientals have never understood the meaning of self-government the way 'we' do. When some Orientals oppose racial discrimination while others practice it, you say 'they're all Orientals at bottom' and class interest, political circumstances, economic factors are totally irrelevant. Or with Bernard Lewis, you say that if Arab Palestinians oppose Israeli settlement and occupation of their lands, then that is merely 'the return of Islam', or, as a renowned contemporary Orientalist defines it, Islamic opposition to non-Islamic peoples, 18 a principle of Islam enshrined in the seventh century. History, politics, and economics do not matter. Islam is Islam, the Orient is Orient, and please take all your ideas about a left and a right wing, revolutions, and change back to Disneyland.

If such tautologies, claims, and dismissals have not sounded familiar to historians, sociologists, economists, and humanists in any other field except Orientalism, the reason is patently obvious. For like its putative subject matter, Orientalism has not allowed ideas to violate its profound serenity. But modern Orientalists -- or area experts, to give them their new name -- have not passively sequestered themselves in language departments. On the contrary, they have profited from Gibb's advice. Most of them today are indistinguishable from other 'experts' and 'advisers' in what Harold Lasswell has called the policy sciences. Thus the military -- national-security possibilities of an alliance, say, between a specialist in 'national character analysis' and an expert in Islamic institutions were soon recognized, for expediency's sake if for nothing else. After all, the 'West' since World War II had faced a clever totalitarian enemy who collected allies for itself among gullible Oriental (African, Asian, undeveloped) nations. What better way of outflanking that enemy than by playing to the Oriental's illogical mind in ways only an Orientalist could devise? Thus emerged such masterful ploys as the stick-and-carrot technique, the Alliance for Progress, SEATO, and so forth, all of them based on traditional 'knowledge' retooled for better manipulation of its supposed object.



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Thus as revolutionary turmoil grips the Islamic Orient, sociologists remind us that Arabs are addicted to 'oral functions', while economists -- recycled Orientalists -- observe that for modern Islam neither capitalism nor socialism is an adequate rubric. As anticolonialism sweeps and indeed unifies the entire Oriental world, the Orientalist damns the whole business not only as a nuisance but as an insult to the Western democracies. As momentous, generally important issues face the world -- issues involving nuclear destruction, catastrophically scarce resources, unprecedented human demands for equality, justice, and economic parity -- popular caricatures of the Orient are exploited by politicians whose source of ideological supply is not only the half-literate technocrat but the superliterate Orientalist. The legendary Arabists in the State Department warn of Arab plans to take over the world. The perfidious Chinese, half-naked Indians, and passive Muslims are described as vultures for 'our' largesse and are damned when 'we lose them' to communism, or to their unregenerate Oriental instincts: the difference is scarcely significant. These contemporary Orientalist attitudes flood the press and the popular mind. Arabs, for example, are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization. Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being. No better instance exists today of what Anwar Abdel Malek calls 'the hegemonism of possessing minorities' and anthropocentrism allied with Europocentrism: a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition 'it' is not quite as human as 'we' are. There is no purer example than this of dehumanized thought. In a sense the limitations of Orientalism are, as I said earlier, the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region. But Orientalism has taken a further step than that: it views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West. So impressive have the descriptive and textual successes of Orientalism been that entire periods of the Orient's cultural, political, and social history are considered mere responses to the West. The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behaviour. Yet if history during the twentieth century has provoked intrinsic change in and for the Orient, the Orientalist is stunned: he cannot realize that to some extent the new [Oriental] leaders, intellectuals or policy-makers, have learned many lessons from the travail of their predecessors. They have also been aided by the structural and institutional transformations accomplished in the intervening period and by the fact that they are to a great extent more at liberty to fashion the future of their countries. They are also much more confident and perhaps slightly aggressive. No longer do they have to function hoping to obtain a favorable verdict from the invisible jury of the West. Their dialogue is not with the West, it is with their fellow-citizens. Moreover, the Orientalist assumes that what his texts have not prepared him for is the result either of outside agitation in the Orient or of the Orient's misguided inanity. None of the innumerable Orientalist texts on Islam, including their summa, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, can prepare their reader for what has taken place since 1948 in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or the Yemens. When the dogmas about Islam cannot serve, not even for the most Panglossian Orientalist, there is recourse to an Orientalized social-science jargon, to such marketable abstractions as *élites*, political stability, modernization, and institutional development, all stamped with the cachet of Orientalist wisdom. In the meantime a growing, more and more dangerous rift separates Orient and Occident. The present crisis dramatizes the disparity between texts and reality. Yet in this study of Orientalism I wish not only to expose the sources of Orientalism's views but also to reflect on its importance, for the contemporary intellectual rightly feels that to ignore a part of the world now demonstrably encroaching upon him is to avoid reality. Humanists have too often confined their attention to departmentalized topics of research. They have neither watched nor learned from disciplines like Orientalism whose unremitting ambition was to master all of a world, not

some easily delimited part of it such as an author or a collection of texts. However, along with such academic security-blankets as 'history,' 'literature,' or 'the humanities,' and despite its overreaching aspirations, Orientalism is involved in worldly, historical circumstances which it has tried to conceal behind an often pompous scientism and appeals to rationalism. The contemporary intellectual can learn from Orientalism how, on the one hand, either to limit or to enlarge realistically the scope of his discipline's claims, and on the other, to see the human ground (the foul-rag-and-bone shop of the heart, Yeats called it) in which texts, visions, methods, and disciplines begin, grow, thrive, and degenerate. To investigate Orientalism is also to propose intellectual ways for handling the methodological problems that history has brought forward, so to speak, in its subject matter, the Orient. But before that we must virtually see the humanistic values that Orientalism, by its scope, experiences, and structures, has all but eliminated.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Edward said was born in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1935 | (b) 1940 |
| (c) 1945 | (d) 1946 |
- (ii) Orientalism was published in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1979 | (b) 1980 |
| (c) 1989 | (d) 1995 |
- (iii) Culture and Imperialism was published in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1990 | (b) 1985 |
| (c) 1991 | (d) 1993 |
- (iv) The socié asiatique was founded in ..... .
- |          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| (a) 1850 | (b) 1822  |
| (c) 1825 | (d) 1840. |

### 20.4 Summary

- This book and Edward Said in general seem capable of generating such intense controversy. Many reviewers of this book seem to forget actually to review the work and focus on attacking Edward Said as a person, many others still forget to review the book and proceed to speak for Palestinian rights and the negative western attitudes of Islam. I will attempt to present an actual review of this book based on MY own reading of it.
- In Orientalism, Said sets about dismantling the study of the "orient" in general with primary focus on the Islamic Near East. Said argues that concepts such as the Orient, Islam, the Arabs, etc. are too vast to be grouped together and presented as one coherent whole, encompassing all there is to know about the subject. Said bases his view on the sheer width and breadth of the subject, the inherent bias of conflicting cultures and more recently the role of the Orientalism in colonialism. It is indeed difficult to attempt to represent a book that is so focused on anti essentialism.
- Said's research of western / occidental discourse was very thorough indeed and he does illustrate through repeated examples how misinformation sufficiently repeated can become accepted academic work. Said also presents an analysis of the causes and motives and theorizes about his findings. A lengthy and a times tedious discussion of the origins of Orientalism is rather repetitive and hard to follow for a non specialist like me.

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- Edward Said however seem to have fallen in the same trap he attributes to Orientalism, he has not attempted to explore Arab writings of the periods he discussed nor has he attempted to present (possibly even read) work by Egyptian and Arab historians of the periods he was addressing save for work carried out in the west and within western universities. In doing so, Said fails to see how the modern and contemporary "orient" sees itself through primarily "oriental" eyes such as Ibn Khaldoun, Al Maqrizi and also through the writings of orientalists like Lane. Said also fails to address the work carried out by orientalists based on many manuscripts of Orientals.
- I particularly enjoyed Said's analysis of the strong ties that Orientalism has with power and colonialism. Said analysis of the diverging development of the British and French practice based on the latter's limited success as a colonial power was very enjoyable and very well thought out. The Orientalism Today and indeed the Afterwards section are also very informative and as these were more familiar areas for Said his presentation of ideas and thoughts came across more clearly and the writing was far less tedious than the earlier parts of the book.
- Orientalism is not an easy read, it will challenge many established views, indeed it has already with a fair degree of success led to changes in the way the Near East is studied. To me, most of all I see this as a book that offers in part a largely coherent explanation for the on-going misunderstanding between the West and the Near East and in Islam. And while Occidentalism does not exist as a field of study in a place like Egypt per se, Said fails to see that the west is viewed largely in terms of its wealth, promiscuous habits, hypocrisy and anti Islam and thus fails to see it as 2 way street, albeit with unequal power.

### 20.5 Key-Words

1. Orientalism : It is "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." It is the image of the 'Orient' expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship.
2. The Oriental : It is the person represented by such thinking. The man is depicted as feminine, weak, yet strangely dangerous because poses a threat to white, Western women. The woman is both eager to be dominated and strikingly exotic. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries.

### 20.6 Review Questions

1. Why, according to Said, can't Orientalism simply be dismissed as the product of Western imperialism? What specific ideas and phenomena does Said, on page 1993, include in the concept of Orientalism?
2. What is Said's view on whether "pure knowledge" can be kept separate from "political knowledge" (1997)? Why is it nonetheless necessary to "eliminate from the start any notion that 'big' facts like imperial domination can be applied mechanically and deterministically to such complex matters as culture and ideas" (1999)?
3. How does Said, around page 2002, justify his method of delimiting and dealing with Orientalism as a subject for study?
4. How does Said account for "the personal dimension"--that is, for his own situation as a Palestinian writing about Orientalism?
5. What is the goal of his book Orientalism? How does his Introduction function as a defense of theorizing about Orientalism?

**Answers: Self-Assessment**

Notes

1. (i) (a)                   (ii) (a)                   (iii) (d)                   (iv) (b)

**20.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

1. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 12.
2. Anwar Abdel Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis", *Diogenes* 44 (Winter 1963): 107-18.
3. Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier: Ein Beitrag zur Begründung der Altertumskunde* (Heidelberg: Mohr & Zimmer, 1808), pp. 44-59; Schlegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte: In achtzehn Vorlesungen gehalten zu Wien im Jahre 1828*, ed. Jean-Jacques Anstett, vol. 9 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernest Behler (Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1971), p. 275.
4. Læon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
5. See Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843-1943: Church and Politics in the Near East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

## Unit 21: Edward Said's Crisis [In Orientalism]: Detailed Study

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand the Scope of Orientalism.
- Discuss Structures and Restructures.

### Introduction

Orientalism by Edward Said is a cononical text of cultural studies in which he has challenged the concept of orientalism or the difference between east and west, as he puts it. He says that with the start of European colonization the Europeans came in contact with the lesser developed countries of the east. They found their civilization and culture very exotic, and established the science of orientalism, which was the study of the orientals or the people from these exotic civilization.

Edward Said argues that the Europeans divided the world into two parts; the east and the west or the occident and the orient or the civilized and the uncivilized. This was totally an artificial boundary; and it was laid on the basis of the concept of them and us or theirs and ours. The Europeans used orientalism to define themselves. Some particular attributes were associated with the orientals, and whatever the orientals weren't the occidents were. The Europeans defined themselves as the superior race compared to the orientals; and they justified their colonization by this concept. They said that it was their duty towards the world to civilize the uncivilized world. The main problem, however, arose when the Europeans started generalizing the attributes they associated with orientals, and started portraying these artificial characteristics associated with orientals in their western world through their scientific reports, literary work, and other media sources. What happened was that it created a certain image about the orientals in the European mind and in doing that infused a bias in the European attitude towards the orientals. This prejudice was also found in the orientalist (scientist studying the orientals); and all their scientific research and reports were under the influence of this. The generalized attributes associated with the orientals can be seen even today, for example, the Arabs are defined as uncivilized people; and Islam is seen as religion of the terrorist.

Here is a brief summary of the book, followed by a critique by Malcolm Kerr.



## **21.1 The Scope of Orientalism**

In this section, Edward Said explains how the science of orientalism developed and how the orientals started considering the orientals as non-human beings. The orientals divided the world in to two parts by using the concept of ours and theirs. An imaginary geographical line was drawn between what was ours and what was theirs. The orientals were regarded as uncivilized people; and the westerners said that since they were the refined race it was their duty to civilize these people and in order to achieve their goal, they had to colonize and rule the orientals. They said that the orientals themselves were incapable of running their own government. The Europeans also thought that they had the right to represent the orientals in the west all by themselves. In doing so, they shaped the orientals the way they perceived them or in other words they were orientalizing the orientals. Various teams have been sent to the east where the orientals silently observed the orientals by living with them; and every thing the orientals said and did was recorded irrespective of its context, and projected to the civilized world of the west. This resulted in the generalization. Whatever was seen by the orientals was associated with the oriental culture, no matter if it is the irrational action of an individual.

The most important use of orientalism to the Europeans was that they defined themselves by defining the orientals. For example, qualities such as lazy, irrational, uncivilized, crudeness were related to the orientals, and automatically the Europeans became active, rational, civilized, sophisticated. Thus, in order to achieve this goal, it was very necessary for the orientalists to generalize the culture of the orientals.

Another feature of orientalism was that the culture of the orientals was explained to the European audience by linking them to the western culture, for example, Islam was made into Mohammadism because Mohammad was the founder of this religion and since religion of Christ was called Christianity; thus Islam should be called Mohammadism. The point to be noted here is that no Muslim was aware of this terminology and this was a completely western created term, and to which the Muslims had no say at all.

## **21.2 Orientalist Structures and Restructures**

In this section, Edward Said points the slight change in the attitude of the Europeans towards the orientals. The orientals were really publicized in the European world especially through their literary work. Oriental land and behaviour was highly romanticized by the European poets and writers and then presented to the western world. The orientalists had made a stage strictly for the European viewers, and the orientals were presented to them with the colour of the orientalist or other writers perception. In fact, the orient lands were so highly romanticized that western literary writers found it necessary to offer pilgrimage to these exotic lands of pure sun light and clean oceans in order to experience peace of mind, and inspiration for their writing. The east was now perceived by the orientalist as a place of pure human culture with no necessary evil in the society. Actually it was this purity of the orientals that made them inferior to the clever, witty, diplomatic, far-sighted European; thus it was their right to rule and study such an innocent race. The Europeans said that these people were too naive to deal with the cruel world, and that they needed the European fatherly role to assist them.

Another justification the Europeans gave to their colonization was that they were meant to rule the orientals since they have developed sooner than the orientals as a nation, which shows that they were biologically superior, and secondly it were the Europeans who discovered the orientals not the orientals who discovered the Europeans. Darwin's theories were put forward to justify their superiority, biologically by the Europeans.

In this chapter, Edward Said also explains how the two most renowned orientalists of the 19th century, namely Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan worked and gave orientalism a new dimension. In fact, Edward Said compliments the contribution made by Sacy in the field. He says that Sacy organized the whole thing by arranging the information in such a way that it was also useful for the future orientalist. And secondly, the prejudice that was inherited by every orientalist was

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considerably low in him. On the other hand, Renan who took advantage of Sacy's work was as biased as any previous orientalist. He believed that the science of orientalism and the science of philology have a very important relation; and after Renan this idea was given a lot attention and many future orientalists worked of in its line.

### **21.3 Orientalism Now**

This section starts off by telling us that how the geography of the world was shaped by the colonization of the Europeans. There was a quest for geographical knowledge which formed the bases of orientalism.

The author then talks about the changing circumstances of the world politics and changing approach to orientalism in the 20th century. The main difference was that where the earlier orientalists were more of silent observers the new orientalists took a part in the every day life of the orientals. The earlier orientalists did not interact a lot with the orientals, whereas the new orientals lived with them as if they were one of them. This wasn't out of appreciation of their lifestyle but was to know more about the orientals in order to rule them properly. Lawrence of Arabia was one of such orientalists.

Then Edward Said goes on to talk about two other scholars Massignon and Gibb. Though Massignon was a bit liberal with orientalists and often tried to protect their rights, there was still inherited biased found in him for the orientals, which can be seen in his work. With the changing world situation especially after World War 1, orientalism took a more liberal stance towards most of its subjects; but Islamic orientalism did not enjoy this status. There were constant attacks to show Islam as a weak religion, and a mixture of many religions and thoughts. Gibb was the most famous Islamic orientalist of this time.

After World War 1 the centre of orientalism moved from Europe to USA. One important transformation that took place during this time was instances of relating it to philology and it was related to social science now. All the orientalists studied the orientals to assist their government to come up with policies for dealing with the orient countries. With the end of World War 2, all the Europeans colonies were lost; and it was believed that there were no more orientals and occidentals, but this was surely not the case. Western prejudice towards eastern countries was still very explicit, and often they managed to generalize most of the eastern countries because of it. For example Arabs were often represented as cruel and violent people. Japanese were always associated with karate where as the Muslims were always considered to be terrorists. Thus, this goes on to show that even with increasing globalization and awareness, such bias was found in the people of the developed countries.

### **21.4 Influence**

Orientalism is considered to be Edward Said's most influential work and has been translated into at least 36 languages. It has been the focus of any number of controversies and polemics, notably with Bernard Lewis, whose work is critiqued in the book's final section, entitled "Orientalism Now: The Latest Phase." In October 2003, one month after Said died, a commentator wrote in a Lebanese newspaper that through Orientalism "Said's critics agree with his admirers that he has single-handedly effected a revolution in Middle Eastern studies in the U.S." He cited a critic who claimed since the publication of Orientalism "U.S. Middle Eastern Studies were taken over by Edward Said's postcolonial studies paradigm". Even those who contest its conclusions and criticize its scholarship, like George P. Landow of Brown University, call it "a major work." The Belgian-born American literary critic Paul De Man supported Said's criticism of such modern scholars, as he stated in his article on semiotic rhetoric: "Said took a step further than any other modern scholar of his time, something I dare not do. I remain in the safety of rhetorical analysis where criticism is the second best thing I do."

However, Orientalism was not the first to produce of Western knowledge of the Orient and of Western scholarship: "Abd-al-Rahman al Jabarti, the Egyptian chronicler and a witness to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, for example, had no doubt that the expedition was as much

an epistemological as military conquest." Even in recent times (1963, 1969 & 1987) the writings and research of V. G. Kiernan, Bernard S. Cohn and Anwar Abdel Malek traced the relations between European rule and representations.

Nevertheless, Orientalism is cited as a detailed and influential work within the study of Orientalism. Anthropologist Talal Asad argued that Orientalism is "not only a catalogue of Western prejudices about and misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims", but more so an investigation and analysis of the "authoritative structure of Orientalist discourse - the closed, self-evident, self-confirming character of that distinctive discourse which is reproduced again and again through scholarly texts, travelogues, literary works of imagination, and the obiter dicta of public men [and women] of affairs." Indeed, the book describes how "the hallowed image of the Orientalist as an austere figure unconcerned with the world and immersed in the mystery of foreign scripts and languages has acquired a dark hue as the murky business of ruling other peoples now forms the essential and enabling background of his or her scholarship."

Said does not include Orientalist painting or other visual art in his survey, despite the example on the book's cover, but other writers, notably Linda Nochlin, have extended his analysis to cover it, "with uneven results".

## Evaluation

Edward Said's evaluation and critique of the set of beliefs known as Orientalism forms an important background for postcolonial studies. His work highlights the inaccuracies of a wide variety of assumptions as it questions various paradigms of thought which are accepted on individual, academic, and political levels.

The Orient signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien ("Other") to the West.

Orientalism is "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." It is the image of the 'Orient' expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship.

The Oriental is the person represented by such thinking. The man is depicted as feminine, weak, yet strangely dangerous because poses a threat to white, Western women. The woman is both eager to be dominated and strikingly exotic. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries.

Latent Orientalism is the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is. Its basic content is static and unanimous. The Orient is seen as separate, eccentric, backward, silently different, sensual, and passive. It has a tendency towards despotism and away from progress. It displays feminine penetrability and supine malleability. Its progress and value are judged in terms of, and in comparison to, the West, so it is always the Other, the conquerable, and the inferior.

Manifest Orientalism is what is spoken and acted upon. It includes information and changes in knowledge about the Orient as well as policy decisions founded in Orientalist thinking. It is the expression in words and actions of Latent Orientalism.

## Earlier Orientalism

The first 'Orientalists' were 19th century scholars who translated the writings of 'the Orient' into English, based on the assumption that a truly effective colonial conquest required knowledge of the conquered peoples. This idea of knowledge as power is present throughout Said's critique. By knowing the Orient, the West came to own it. The Orient became the studied, the seen, the observed, the object; Orientalist scholars were the students, the seers, the observers, the subject. The Orient was passive; the West was active.

One of the most significant constructions of Orientalist scholars is that of the Orient itself. What is considered the Orient is a vast region, one that spreads across a myriad of cultures and countries.

## Notes

It includes most of Asia as well as the Middle East. The depiction of this single 'Orient' which can be studied as a cohesive whole is one of the most powerful accomplishments of Orientalist scholars. It essentializes an image of a prototypical Oriental—a biological inferior that is culturally backward, peculiar, and unchanging—to be depicted in dominating and sexual terms. The discourse and visual imagery of Orientalism is laced with notions of power and superiority, formulated initially to facilitate a colonizing mission on the part of the West and perpetuated through a wide variety of discourses and policies. The language is critical to the construction. The feminine and weak Orient awaits the dominance of the West; it is a defenseless and unintelligent whole that exists for, and in terms of, its Western counterpart. The importance of such a construction is that it creates a single subject matter where none existed, a compilation of previously unspoken notions of the Other. Since the notion of the Orient is created by the Orientalist, it exists solely for him or her. Its identity is defined by the scholar who gives it life.

## Contemporary Orientalism

Said argues that Orientalism can be found in current Western depictions of "Arab" cultures. The depictions of "the Arab" as irrational, menacing, untrustworthy, anti-Western, dishonest, and—perhaps most importantly—prototypical, are ideas into which Orientalist scholarship has evolved. These notions are trusted as foundations for both ideologies and policies developed by the Occident. Said writes: "The hold these instruments have on the mind is increased by the institutions built around them. For every Orientalist, quite literally, there is a support system of staggering power, considering the ephemerality of the myths that Orientalism propagates. The system now culminates into the very institutions of the state. To write about the Arab Oriental world, therefore, is to write with the authority of a nation, and not with the affirmation of a strident ideology but with the unquestioning certainty of absolute truth backed by absolute force." He continues, "One would find this kind of procedure less objectionable as political propaganda—which is what it is, of course—were it not accompanied by sermons on the objectivity, the fairness, the impartiality of a real historian, the implication always being that Muslims and Arabs cannot be objective but that Orientalists. . .writing about Muslims are, by definition, by training, by the mere fact of their Westernness. This is the culmination of Orientalism as a dogma that not only degrades its subject matter but also blinds its practitioners."

## Said's Project

Said calls into question the underlying assumptions that form the foundation of Orientalist thinking. A rejection of Orientalism entails a rejection of biological generalizations, cultural constructions, and racial and religious prejudices. It is a rejection of greed as a primary motivating factor in intellectual pursuit. It is an erasure of the line between 'the West' and 'the Other.' Said argues for the use of "narrative" rather than "vision" in interpreting the geographical landscape known as the Orient, meaning that a historian and a scholar would turn not to a panoramic view of half of the globe, but rather to a focused and complex type of history that allows space for the dynamic variety of human experience. Rejection of Orientalist thinking does not entail a denial of the differences between 'the West' and 'the Orient,' but rather an evaluation of such differences in a more critical and objective fashion. 'The Orient' cannot be studied in a non-Orientalist manner; rather, the scholar is obliged to study more focused and smaller culturally consistent regions. The person who has until now been known as 'the Oriental' must be given a voice. Scholarship from afar and second-hand representation must take a back seat to narrative and self-representation on the part of the 'Oriental.'

## Conclusion

Edward Said concludes his book by saying that he is not saying that the orientalists should not make generalization, or they should include the orient perspective too, but creating a boundary at the first place is something which should not be done. Said contends that the Orient, as much as the Occident, "is not an inert fact of nature" . It is, rather, an "idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence for the West" . All this is not to say that the Orient is "essentially an idea, or creation with no corresponding reality" .

However, what Said is interested in is the Orient as a "regular constellation of ideas". Acknowledging that "ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood without . . . their configurations of power being studied", Said underscores that the discursive construction of the East is possible because the relationship between Occident and Orient is an asymmetrical one, a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony". The "discourse about the Orient" (for example, how Flaubert "spoke for and represented" his Egyptian courtesan and, in the process, "produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman" was enabled because of a "pattern of relative strength between East and West" .

Drawing on the Foucauldian notion of 'discourse,' rather than the familiar Marxist distinction between ideology or 'false consciousness' and scientific knowledge, Said stresses that Orientalism should not be thought of as a "structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away". Said's point is that Orientalism is not merely some "airy European fantasy about the Orient" . It is, rather, a "system of knowledge about the Orient", a created body of theory and practice in which . . . there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism . . . an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied . . . the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture.

Said underscores Orientalism's "close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions". Said draws on Gramsci's distinction between civil and political society, the latter consisting in state institutions (the army, police, the central bureaucracy, etc.) and the former in voluntary affiliations like schools, families and unions. Culture, Said writes, is to be found operating within civil society "where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent" . In any society, certain "cultural forms" and "ideas" predominate over others: the "form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony".

Said stresses that the discursive construction of the Orient serves a vital purpose: it subtends the exclusionary process upon which European identity is predicated, that is, the "idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" . The result is an "idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all those non-Europeans". Said is at pains to point out that discourse on the Orient must be understood in relation to the "period of extraordinary European ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present": the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader or the soldier was in, or thought about the Orient because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part. Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character. The 'Oriental world,' in short, 'emerged' out of the "unchallenged centrality" of a "sovereign Western consciousness" . Significantly, these 'truths' were developed "according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections".

Said wonders whether Orientalism should be equated with the "general group of ideas overriding the mass of material . . . shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism and the like" or the "much more varied work of almost uncountable individual writers, whom one would take up as individual instances of authors dealing with the Orient" . These are "two alternatives, general and particular, are really two perspectives on the same material", Said contends, which he intends to apply conjointly the mass of material under investigation, avoiding the possibility of "distortion" by steering his way between the extremes of "too dogmatic a generality" and "too positivistic a localised focus". In so doing, he believes, he avoids the



Notes

dangers of both "coarse polemic on so unacceptably general a level of description" and "so detailed and atomistic a series of analyses as to lose all track of the general lines of force informing the field". His goal is accordingly to "recognise individuality and to reconcile it with its . . . general and hegemonic context".

The Distinction between Pure and Political Knowledge Said points out that the prevailing assumption, especially in the humanities, is that knowledge is "nonpolitical, that is, scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief". However, he argues, no one has ever devised a method for detaching a scholar from the circumstances of his life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society. Arguing that the "political societies" of the imperial powers inevitably imparted to their "civil societies" a "direct political infusion . . . where and whenever matters pertaining to their imperial interests abroad are concerned", Said contends that the British intellectual in the nineteenth century, for example, took an interest in British colonies "that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies". For Said, thus, the issue at hand is determining the nature of the relationship between the "big dominating fact, as I have described it" and the "details of everyday life that govern the minute discipline of a novel or a scholarly text as each is being written". The fact of imperialism, that is, the economic, political and military involvement of Europeans and, later, Americans in the Orient necessarily shaped how seemingly apolitical institutions and individuals viewed the Orient.

In short, like any discursive practice, Orientalism must be understood in relation to the imbalance of power, in this case, that which has existed between Europe and the rest of the world for the last few centuries. Said, however, rejects the notion that "'big' facts like imperial domination can be applied mechanically and deterministically to such complex matters as culture and ideas".

Undoubtedly all discourse on the Orient was politically-motivated but, he contends, "it was the culture that created that interest, that acted dynamically along with brute political, economic and military rationales". Orientalism is accordingly not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographic distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we'). Said points out that most scholars would not deny that "texts exist in contexts" and acknowledge the fact of "intertextuality, . . . the pressures of conventions, predecessors and rhetorical styles". However, Said contends that most are unwilling to admit that "political, institutional and ideological constraints act in the same manner on the individual author". Many are reluctant to give up their belief in the "principle of 'creativity,' in which the poet is believed on his own, and out of his pure mind to have brought forth his work". In the same way that there is an "explicit connection" in classic philosophers such as Locke "between their 'philosophic' doctrines and racial theory, justifications of slavery, or arguments for colonial exploitation". Said acknowledges that much materialist criticism has been 'vulgar' or "crudely iconoclastic", and has often failed to keep up with the "enormous technical advances in detailed

textual analysis". Gesturing towards the Marxist Base/superstructure model, he opines, too, that there has been little serious effort to bridge the "gap between the superstructural and the base levels in textual, historical scholarship". Said is at pains to argue that such political influences "were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting" or restrictive. In the case of Orientalism, however, "political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination and scholarly institutions - in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility.

In short, Said argues, nearly every nineteenth century (if not before) literary writer,

he contends, "was extraordinarily well aware of the fact of empire". It is in this light that aid views Orientalism as a "dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires - British, French, American". From this point of view, Said believes that the following "political questions" are the crucial ones:

what other sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like the Orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novelwriting and lyric poetry come to the service of Orientalism's broadly imperialist view of the world? What changes, modulations, refinements, even revolutions take place within Orientalism? What is the meaning of originality, of continuity, of individuality in this context? How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another? In fine, how can we treat the cultural, historical phenomenon of Orientalism as a kind of willed human work - not of mere unconditioned ratiocination - in all its historical complexity, detail and worth without at the same time losing sight of the alliance between cultural work, political tendencies, the state and the specific realities of domination? For Said, "humanistic study can responsibly address itself to politics and culture" without establishing a "hard-and-fast rule about the relationship between knowledge and politics". Each particular study must, rather, "formulate the nature of that connection in the specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances".

## Self-Assessment

### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Orientalism has been translated into ..... .
- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| (a) 20 languages | (b) 85 languages  |
| (c) 36 languages | (d) none of these |
- (ii) Napoleon's invasions of Egypt took place in ..... .
- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| (a) 1795 | (b) 1798 |
| (c) 1990 | (d) 1985 |
- (iii) The orient was ..... .
- |                      |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| (a) active           | (b) passive        |
| (c) both (a) and (b) | (d) none of these. |

## 21.5 Summary

- Orientalism administered a much-needed correction to the study of the Arab and Asian worlds. Any historian, social scientist or humanist working in related fields should own a copy. The strength of Edward Said's Orientalism is its highlighting of the underlying assumptions of dominance and subjection in Orientalist scholarship. Said correctly points out that the British, French and United States have relied on the reduction of the Orient to an academic study backed by a mythical image of its inhabitants and cultures as more primitive, passionate, mystical and illogical. Complementing this has been a presumption of Western superiority that allows diagnosis of social ills and prescription of Western remedies for these ills.

Notes

- Said also pointed out a secondary weakness in the Orientalist approach to its studies. If Westerners presume the Orient to be more passionate and mystical, they may assume that it provides absolute alternatives to the ills of Western culture and modernism. Thus the span of Western history scrutinized by Said has seen individuals and groups embracing ill-understood religions and cultural precepts. The anti-majoritarian/left-leaning subcultures arising during the upheavals of the 1960's are particularly susceptible to this.
- This leads naturally to Aijid Ahmad's primary criticism of Said. Orientalism doesn't consider the varied responses of the Orient/Third-World to its theories. In particular, Ahmad correctly points out that Orientalism over-focuses blames on the West and doesn't address the self-inflicted problems of "Oriental" societies. Based on this criticism, the proper approach is to balance the effects of Western Orientalism and the indigenous difficulties. Essentially, Ahmad advocates abandoning the simple depiction of the Orient for a complex and layered reality.
- Orientalism's uncriticized weakness lies in its treatment of Europe. Said willingly admits his limited focus on Britain, France and United States may miss some important scholarship found elsewhere. This concentration has some logic to it. His trio of nations has been among the strongest if not dominant powers in the colonial and post-colonial world. A complete survey of European Orientalism could run for several volumes. Yet in this focus, Said misses those European nations who had had longer and more intricate relations with the "Orient".
- Said mentions his lack of attention to German scholarship on the Orient. Beyond the loss in additional scholarship, he cannot take account of the direct influence of the German academic tradition on the rest of Europe and particularly the United States. Beyond this immediate effect, Said loses the transmitted experience of the German Reich's participation in the direct struggle against the Ottoman Empire. While he mentions the Medieval and Renaissance hostility to Islam based on direct threat and conflict, he ignores the extension of this conflict into the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet this conflict remained a dominant factor in the existence of the Austrian and Russian Empires. As long as the struggle continued, the Orient in the form of Islam would have a direct influence on the course of European history. The simple illustration of this is the European approach to independence for the Balkan states and occasional support for the Ottomans versus an opponent. While this support was partially based on the perceived weakness of the Ottomans and resultant manipulability, it also concedes the existence of some real and beneficial power.
- Said's exclusion of other European states weakens his structure in a different manner. It's useful to consider the British and French perceptions of Austria and Russia. A simple interpretation of Orientalism presumes a unified Europe as opposed to the Orient. Yet this ignores the equally institutionalized denigration of Austria and Russia. We can refer to the image of the mythical Slavic province of Ruritania (cf. Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*), a den of intrigue and iniquity. Add to this Said's notes on the relative knowledge of the Near Orient versus the Far Orient. This suggests more of a subtle gradation in the construction of the Other than is represented by Orientalism's sharp division between Occident and Orient.
- Other historical patterns also stress the need for the representation of a more complex Occident. For instance Said argues that European exploration and extension of trade routes to India and the Far East shows hostility to Islam. A simpler explanation may be mercantile concerns for lowering expenses and increasing profits. Direct trade was more profitable than relying on Arab middlemen. The Arab reaction to Portuguese penetration of the Indian Ocean reflected a concern with being excluded from the profits of trade with India rather than with the intrusion of a new power in the region. This concern with trade leads to different motivations for learning languages and examining cultures. A variety of motivations for scholarship argue for a more complex Occident. The need for more complexity does not necessarily invalidate Said's central points on the institutionalized domination common to Western European Orientalism. Rather it demands refinement of a useful critique of the study of colonialism.

## 21.6 Key-Words

Notes

1. Defamiliarization : The Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky uses the term *ostranenie*, usually translated as 'making strange' or 'defamiliarization', to denote what he sees as the primary function of literary texts—to make the familiar unfamiliar, to renew the old, or make the habitual appear fresh or strange.
2. Deixis : A term from linguistics, referring to the use of words concerning the place and time of utterance, e.g. 'this', 'here'.
3. Dénouement : (Fr: 'unknotting') either the events following the climax of a plot, or the resolution of this plot's complications at the end of a short story, novel or play.

## 21.7 Review Questions

1. To what extent is Said a Foucauldian? What other theorists does he bring into his analysis, and how does he employ their ideas either to qualify or supplement his own and Foucault's framework? What reason does Said offer on page 1996 (bottom) for not simply sticking with one theoretical framework rather than integrating the work of several theorists?
2. Said wants to move away from theories that he believes have construed the literary text as an object apart from the world, from everyday reality. How, according to Said, does Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the opposition between speech and texts reproduce the problem that Said wants to avoid?
3. What is the Scope of Orientalism"? Explain .
4. Discuss the Orientalist Structures and Restructures."

## Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (c)                      (ii) (b)                      (iii) (b)

## 21.8 Further Readings



Books

1. Bourdieu, Pierre. 1971. *Reproduction culturelle et reproduction sociale*. *Social Science Information*. April 10: 45-79. 1990b.
2. *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press. 1993a. *Sociology in Question*, translated by Richard Nice. London: Sage Publications.
3. Læon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
4. Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843-1943: Church and Politics in the Near East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).
5. A. L. Tibawi, *British Interests in Palestine, 1800-1901* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 5.-285-
6. Gérard de Nerval, *Oeuvres*, ed. Albert Béguin and Jean Richet (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 1:933.
7. Hugo, *Oeuvres poétiques*, 1:580.
8. Sir Walter Scott, *The Talisman* (1825; reprint ed., London: J. M. Dent, 1914), pp. 38-9.
9. See Albert Hourani, "Sir Hamilton Gibb, 1895-1971", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 58 (1972):495.

## Unit 22: Edward Said's Crisis [In Orientalism]: Inter-Textual Analysis (Alluding Fanon, Foucault and Bhabha)

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- 22.3 Foucault's Concept of Discourse
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- 22.5 Summary
- 22.6 Key-Words
- 22.7 Review Questions
- 22.8 Further Readings

### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss the idea of the wide field known as Postcolonial.
- Explain 'Orientalism' (Said), 'Subalternity' (Spivak) and '(Bhabha)'.

### Introduction

As stated earlier, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan are three French thinkers (they are mostly clubbed under 'poststructuralism') who have exercised a profound influence on almost all that has happened in literary theory in recent times. In the case of postcolonial theory, the man who has exercised the greatest influence on the field is Foucault. Said's work shows his influence in a very marked way. Spivak and Bhabha also draw from him. The more obvious influence on Spivak is that of Derrida and Bhabha's case the more obvious influence is that of Lacan.

Since power is a major issue in postcolonial theory let us take a look at Foucault's view of power. Simply stated, 'discourse' (to Foucault) is a system of statements within which and by which the world can be known. Discourses are ways of constituting knowledge together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations that inhere in such knowledge and the relations between them. Power too is a relation and gets exercised within discourses in the ways in which these discourses constitute and govern individual subjects. In *The History of Sexuality. Volume One, An Introduction*, Foucault defines power as:

The multiplicity of force relations imminent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization, as the process by which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverse them; as the support which these force relations find in one another thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another and lastly as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the State apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.

Postcolonialism involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its present effects both at the level of ex-colonial societies and of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire.



What was it that gave rise to postcolonialism? Why was it that a study of the cultural dimension of imperialism became important? First, independence movements around the world put an end to colonialism. Yet the residual effects of imperialism continued to affect the cultures of the erstwhile colonies. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) is one such intervention in colonial discourse. By the 1980's a substantial body of commonwealth literature had emerged in which writers tried to make sense of the impact of colonialism. There was a greater awareness of the power relations between the West and Third World cultures. All these led to a study and analysis of colonialism and its after-effects.

## 22.1 The Holy Trinity

Said's Orientalism which appeared in 1978 is a good starting point for us. Said sees Orientalism as a discourse by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period. Said states:

Taking the eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be defined as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, describing it, by teaching it, setting it, ruling over it, in short Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.

On page 3 itself, Said acknowledges that he had found it useful to employ Foucault's notion of discourse as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discipline and Punish*.

A very important statement which Said makes on page 12 of Orientalism is:

Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institutions, nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the orient nor is it representative and expressive of a nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Orient World'. It is rather a distribution of geographical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological and philosophical text; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction but also a whole sense of 'interest'...

By means of the discourse of orientalism, Western cultural institutions are responsible for the creation of those 'others'. The Orientals' very difference from the Occident helps establish that opposition by which Europe's own identity can be established. The knowledge of the Orient created by and embodied within the discourse of Orientalism serves to construct an image of the Orient and the Orientals as subservient and subject to domination by the Occident. The knowledge of 'subject races' or 'Orientals' makes their management easy and profitable.



**Did you know?** Said's book establishes that stereotypes and general ideology about the orient as 'the other' have helped to produce myths about the laziness, deceit and irrationality of Orientals.

Knowledge of the Orient is generated out of strength and such strength-generated knowledge, in turn, 'creates' the Orient, the Oriental and his/her world. In most cases the Oriental is 'contained' the 'represented' by dominating frameworks and the encoding and comparison of the orient with the West ensures in the long run that oriental culture and perspectives are a deviation and a perversion that justify an inferior status for the latter. The Orient is seen as essentially monolithic with an unchanging history, while the Occident is dynamic with an active history. Not only that, the Orient and the Oriental are seen to be passive, non-participatory 'objects' of study. The Orient, in that sense, was sought to be established as a textual construct. On page 36 of his book Said states:

Knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control. The whole thing thus becomes an on-going project.

Notes

These then are the essentials of Said's formulations about 'Orientalism'. Let us now move to the essentials of Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'subalternity'. Spivak is a leading contemporary feminist deconstructionist who pays careful attention to issues of gender and race. Her use of the term 'subaltern' is influenced by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci consistently referred to a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' addressed the way the 'subaltern' woman is constructed, as absent or silent or not listened to. The 'muteness' of women in postcolonial societies is the main issue which her work confronts. The main argument of her essay is that, between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of woman disappears not into a pristine nothingness, but into a marginal position between tradition and modernization.

Spivak uses the term 'subaltern' (of lower rank) for women, blacks, the colonized and the working class. Subalternity comes to suggest the repressive dominance of white Western thinking and an allegory of the displacement of the gendered and colonized (i.e. subaltern) subject, by the imposition of narratives of internationalism and nationalism. The violence inflicted by Western forms of thought upon the East is of great concern to Spivak. She takes 'the third world' to be a creation of the west that locks non-western cultures into an imperial representation. 'Worlding' is the name she gives to the process through which 'colonized space' is 'brought into the world; that is made to exist apart of a world essentially constituted by Eurocentrism.'

In these kinds of formulations one of the possible pitfalls in attributing an absolute power to the hegemonic discourse in creating the native and not making enough room for the resistance of the native. That brings us to Bhabha, the third figure in 'the Holy Trinity' and to his key notion that is 'mimicry'.

To Bhabha the operations of the unconscious in the imperial context are far from simple because desire for, as well as fear of, 'the other', does not allow the identities of the colonizer and the colonized to stay fixed and unitary. Colonial power undermines its own authority and can paradoxically provide the means for native resistance. The site of resistance, the strategic reversal of the process of domination that looks the colonial power squarely in the eye, is marked by 'hybridity', an 'in-between' space. It not only displaces the history that creates it, but sets up new structures of authority and generates new political initiatives. It undermines authority because it imitates it only outwardly.

On account of the difficulty of categorizing different cultures into universalist frameworks, Bhabha finds the idea of the 'nation' a little problematic. He thinks that the idea stems from the imposition of a rather arbitrary 'national' character upon a necessarily very heterogeneous collection of people(s).



*Did u know?* 'Mimicry' designates a gap between the norm of civility as presented by European Enlightenment and its distorted colonial imitation. It serves as the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility and is an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience.

## 22.2 Said on Heart of Darkness

The thrust of Said's 1966 book *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* is somewhat different from his comments on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness in Culture and Imperialism* (1993). On page 25 of the latter book, Said states:

This narrative ... is connected directly with the redemptive force, as well as the waste and horror of Europe's mission in the dark world. 'Whatever is lost or elided or simply made up in Marlow's immensely compelling recitation is compensated for in the narrative's sheer historical momentum, the temporal forward movement.'

To Said, the imperialist politics and aesthetics which *Heart of Darkness* embodies was in the closing years of the nineteenth century an aesthetics, politics and epistemology which were almost unavoidable and inevitable. The strength of Said's reading in this case is in his balancing of the aesthetic and the political. That is something which one cannot say about the reaction of someone like Chinua Achebe who saw *Heart of Darkness* as 'out and out' a racist book.

In the same vein Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (which does not figure in your course) is seen by Said as a great document of its aesthetic moment, the realization of a great and cumulative process, which, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, is reaching its last major moment before India's independence; on the one hand, surveillance and control over India: on the other, love for and fascinated attention to its every detail (Culture and Imperialism, P. 195)

These kinds of readings are more open than those which merely refute, challenge and oppose. Most 'high modernist' text deserve and demand a reading of that kind in view of their complexity and of the irony that mostly goes into their making.

The general characteristic of reading in postcolonial criticism is that a text is 'read back' from the perspective of the colonized. Such reading characteristically rejects the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seeks to show its limitations of outlook especially its general inability to empathize across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference.

### **22.3 Foucault's Concept of Discourse**

The mechanism which Edward W. Said deploys in order to set his concept of Orientalism in motion relies on Foucault's concept of discourse or discursive representation, which allows Said to talk about Orientalism as a body of texts that operates through a network of textual referentiality. Said also relies on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, to explain power-differentials between the East and the West. Orientalism gains power through the superiority of the hegemonic culture. The subjugation of the East is achieved not only by direct coercion but also by partial representation through a collection of texts-ranging from travel writings, novels, translations, religious tracts and historical documents to laws and codes-whose coherent density is able to claim the power to represent the East and, to a certain extent, becomes sufficient to speak on behalf of the East without the East speaking for itself. However, Orientalism has faced a number of criticisms in recent decades. Some of the major attacks have come from David Kopf (1980, reprinted 2000), who sees Orientalism as lacking historical reality; Michael Richardson (1990, reprinted 2000), who attacks Orientalism for the absence of a reciprocal relationship between the East and the West; and Sadik Jalal al-'Azm (1981, reprinted 2000), who argues that Orientalism tends to essentialise the West in the same way that Said accuses the West of essentialising the East for imperialist ends. Lisa Lowe (1991) questions the lack of heterogeneity in Orientalism with regard to the difference between British and French Orientalisms.

While many of these criticisms have drawn mainly on various aspects of Orientalism, only a few have mentioned the problem of agency in the methodology Said adopted in theorising Orientalism (e.g. Bové 1986). Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to revisit Said's methodology and its application to Orientalism. I will examine the impact of Said's use of Foucauldian discourse on the notion of 'author,' or in this case the Orientalist agents. I will then explore the problem of agency which becomes manifest as a by product of the unresolved tension between subjectivism and objectivism defaulted in Foucauldian discourse. In light of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, I will critique Said's concept of the 'author' through Bourdieu's concept of habitus and assess the possibility of reading Orientalist authors, who can, as I will argue, be treated as active cultural agents and hence their role pertaining to a form of habitus. While Said did not refer to Bourdieu's work in his Orientalism, his explanation of the transferable profession of the Orientalists is similar to the concept of cultural agency advocated by Bourdieu. This paper does not intend to fill in the gap in Said's methodology but rather to shed light on the possibility of reading Orientalism as cultural reproduction. In fact, I will argue that Said's approach to Orientalism, to a certain degree, already lends itself to the theory of cultural reproduction. Bourdieu's sociology, also known as 'generative structuralism,' complements what critics view as a methodological shortcoming by shedding light

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on a more dynamic sociological approach, as opposed to a usually held 'static' discourse. Said's approach to knowledge Like Foucault, Said sees language as a battleground where speakers and societies compete for power and domination. Foucault argues that the formation of discourse is subject to the use of power which yields both repressive and generative effects at the same time. Nevertheless, with the strong influence of structuralism and the cult of the death of the author, to entrust discourse, which is theoretically deprived of agents, with a generative function seems an awkward business. This problem can be seen in Foucault's concepts of "archaeology" and "genealogy."

Foucault explains the repressive control of discourse as a feature of archaeology which we can see in statements that attempt "to mark out and distinguish the principles of ordering, exclusion and rarity in discourse" (Foucault 1969: 234). We understand discourse as a 'limited system of presence' in which only enunciations or the rarity of statements give meanings to discourse and not the unsaid. While archaeology refers to the formation of objective structure, Foucault develops another concept called genealogy to account for the generative effects of discourse. In his later essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1977), he explains how his use of 'genealogy' is derived from Nietzsche's view of the development of morals through power. While the word tends to suggest the idea of 'tracing back to the origin', Foucault's genealogy does not seek to establish a linear development of historical events. On the contrary, Foucault uses genealogy to deconstruct that very linearity that is central to the traditional way of writing history-as he puts it, genealogy "seeks to makes visible all of those discontinuities that cross us" (1977: 162). However, Foucault's notion of genealogy, as David Eick points out, remains a 'hazy' distinction from the concept of archaeology. It is questionable that genealogy really has a generative function that archaeology does not offer, when, in fact, one can argue that archaeology can pinpoint the same problem of historical discontinuity. Furthermore, Foucault does not explain if one needs to venture into the realm of the unsaid, the absent, the unannounced, in order to reconstruct genealogy. If so, it would also call into question the need to inquire into the subjective mode of the absent, which is what Foucault excludes in theorising discourse and archaeology for "[t]he analysis of statements operates therefore without reference to a cogito" (Foucault 2004: 138). Simon During raises the same problem in his article "Genealogy, Authorship, Power":

Where does this system of constraint end? Where does the positive programme of enabling the "unsayable or unsaid" to speak, begin? To give prisoners, gays, the colonized or the marginal a voice is also to demand of them their "truth," to suppose that they are the originating subjects of a specific, more or less univocal, "voice," and therefore, to some degree at least, to call them into that de-centred centre which constitutes the (post)modern world. (During 1992: 127) In effect, Foucault's critics, such as Dreyfus and Rabinow, see the concepts of archaeology and genealogy as incompatible, with archaeology encapsulated by the statements and governing rules of discourse and genealogy seeking to trace the root of power and deconstruct precisely the discursive rules which situate it (Eick 1999: 88).

Following Foucault's archaeology, Said bases his argument on a network of texts which forms a web of interrelated discourse. Orientalism is a concept which works through its textual re-presence in which stories, accounts and memoirs reenact the presence of thoughts and concepts about the Orient as a textual presence, which in turn marks itself as representation in written format. Said's Orientalism, together with the subsequent book Culture and Imperialism (1993) which is a postcolonial expansion of his thesis in the former, are an archaeological project that attempted to map out the discursive representations of the Orient and the colonies by the West and the empires. In the Foucauldian manner, Said traces how the images of the West's other are constructed and distinguished through a rarefaction and objectification of statements that provides a ground for investigating the representations of the Orient and the colonies. Wolfgang Iser (2006) notes the strong influence of Foucauldian discourse in Said's Culture and Imperialism: Edward Said's postcolonial discourse, as developed in his book Culture and Imperialism, works as an imposition in the Foucauldian sense on both colonial and anticolonial discourse. These are the "objects" to be charted and it is this tripartite relationship through which postcolonial discourse gains salience. Hence the latter assumes a critical position toward what it operates upon, although it has the same

structure as the discourse on which it focuses its power. It is also marked by the same rarefaction that distinguishes all discourse, which are only differentiated from one another by the motivation that causes their respective restrictions.

Similarly, in *Orientalism*, discourse is described as consisting of collected statements on the Orient, but Said adds that it operates on two principal concepts which Said calls strategic location and strategic formation. These two terms, while they rely on discursive formation as a central theoretical tool, reintroduce the 'author' into the analysis of power by incorporating the presence of the author into the formation of texts: My principal methodological devices for studying authority here are what can be called strategic location, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about, and strategic formation, which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large.

Said deploys strategic location as an extension to discourse: the author is seen as using the text to locate his position vis-à-vis the Orient. By 'locating', Said is referring to the author's choice of narrative styles, themes, images and motifs which are woven into the particular way of presenting the Orient to the audience. This is how Orientalists construct their discourse about the faraway land. The Orientalist narrative which Said explores at great length is the style of two French Orientalist scholars who engaged in Arabic studies in the nineteenth century - Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892). Said identifies two themes in Sacy's works and approaches to studying Arabic literature: one is his endeavour to become champion of Arabic scholarship through his various political roles, namely, as resident Orientalist at the French Foreign Ministry (Said 1979: 124), and the other is his 'dedicated sense of pedagogic and rational utility'-the latter theme is derived from Sacy's role as professor of Arabic at the celebrated Collège de France and his utilitarian approach to the selection of Arabic poems in his *Chrestomathie Arabe* (1806). These two themes inform Sacy's position as an Orientalist who strives to make his work useful to the French public through his status as an Arabic specialist. Said argues that Sacy's dedicated and utilitarian approaches to his works can be seen in texts bearing his name. As for Renan, Said derives the theme of his *Orientalism* from Renan's contribution of philology to Orientalist scholarship in France. Renan is identified as the trendsetter who imposed on the study of Oriental languages a scientific methodology, in which language is broken down into units that can be categorised and compared in an objective manner. In this way, Said places these authors/Orientalists in the text, and reads their presence as a personal imprint in the text; this is the point at which Said claims to depart from the discursive method of Foucault, to whom he admits being greatly indebted: Yet unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, The author in Edward Said's "Orientalism". I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like *Orientalism*.

For Said, individual names play an important part in providing 'labels' and links to which other texts can refer. The example that occurs quite frequently throughout his book is how Edward William Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) became a major reference for writers about the Orient such as Nerval, Flaubert and Richard Burton. Lane's authority can be viewed as indispensable and it gives credibility to whoever cites him in their works. The image of Egypt during the nineteenth century is therefore a product of textual referentiality, in which each text looks to other texts for reference in terms of information and authority, through labels carrying the names of individuals. Critiquing Said's 'Author' from Bourdieu's perspective While the author seems to gain more presence in Said's textual analysis than in Foucault's classic discourse, the role of the author is still limited: Said tends to treat authors as being part of the text rather than text producers. This points to the problem of the role of agents in relation to structures, which, as Eick points out, is not elaborated in Foucault's usage of discourse or archaeology, and the generative function of Foucault's notion of genealogy remains largely abstract. Bourdieu sees the problem as



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bringing structuralist theory to an impasse- structuralism is unable to go beyond a treatment of knowledge confined to objective structure alone. Bourdieu also finds subjectivist modes of knowledge, such as existentialism and aesthetics, to be focusing too much on personal accounts, especially individual understanding, rather than the external conditions which shape or influence public mentality. Having dealt with the problem of this objective/ subjective contradiction, Bourdieu tries to break away from relying on either mode of knowledge. His sociology is a dialectically interactive mode of knowledge production which does not confine itself to either the objective or the subjective but rather integrates functions of both objective structure and experiential production (See Bourdieu 1972, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b, 1998). Bourdieu's break with exclusive subjectivism or exclusive objectivism yields a new type of mediation which he calls practice-an act which links social agents with social structures. David Swartz (1997: 58) suggests that Bourdieu's introduction of a mediating device called for an epistemological break which resulted in Bourdieu's investigation of two questions. The first is how practice and structure inform each other reciprocally; practices by social agents constitute social structures and, in turn, are determined by them. Such a relationship can be seen in the concept of habitus in which Bourdieu combines actions by social agents with structural factors of their society. The second is in the way theoretical and practical knowledge should be handled by social scientists. Bourdieu's sociology is a response to the notion of the 'disinterestedness' of scholars and their so-called 'object of study.' Bourdieu contends that the academic tradition, especially in the social sciences, has become absorbed in a theoretical approach to the point at which theory itself has become the sole narrative of a social event, no matter how varied each single context appears to be. Bourdieu's concern is that MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities, Special Issue No. 18, 2009 scholars lack reflexive vigilance towards practical knowledge and are likely to subscribe to a type of academic disinterestedness that divides sociological research from practical reality. Yet it is still important for researchers to have a conceptual paradigm which is able to capture and theorise social patterns in a critical manner. From this direction, Bourdieu developed an approach to sociological research which he terms "reflexive sociology," a theory that aims to make scholars aware of the 'scholastic fallacy' of detaching academic tradition from the social world. Structuralism, especially that of Lévi- Strauss and Althusser, is criticised by Bourdieu as engaging in objectifying social events into reductionistic structures which dissociate the written report from social reality. Sameh F. Hanna points out that such a gap is the result of the objective implementation of clear-cut structuralist binary oppositions, which leads to the omission of agency-the cause of the structuralist scholastic fallacy. This neat delineation of the social phenomenon which underlies the concept of 'structure' purportedly provides a tool for describing and predicting phenomena, but in fact it constrains social reality within deterministic patterns by means of which all phenomena are projected as exact actualisations of the structuralist model. To further consolidate the objectivist character of their model, structuralists confine themselves to describing the material reality of the social world, excluding the social agents' representations of this reality.

While Foucault is generally associated with structuralism, we may hold that he 'narrowly' escaped the objectivist approach that dominates structuralism in that he was aware of the genealogy of discourse through the generative effect of agency as we can see in the works after *The Archaeology of Knowledge* such as "Discourse on Language" (1971), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), *The Will to Knowledge* (1976-the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*). However, while Foucault tried to trace the genealogy of ideology, power, sexuality and explain the 'history of the present,' the motivation of those agents or carriers of these values were 'left out' and this has subjected Foucault to a great deal of criticism. Charles Taylor, one of his severest critics, attacked Foucault for an 'unintelligible' account of history which fails to recognise the 'purposeful actions' of agents whose roles in shaping discourses cannot easily be dismissed (During 1992: 137). Said is aware of the importance of the experiential mode of production and the problem of academic disinterestedness, for, as he states in the introduction to *Orientalism*, his life as an Arab Palestinian living in the US does make him a part of the whole project of Orientalism, as someone living with the impact of Orientalist discourse.

## 22.4 The Importance of Postcolonialism

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'Orientalism', 'subalternity' and 'mimicry' are important aspects of the work of the three critics. One of the problems that Orientalism (the book) suffers from is (that it assumes) too readily that an unequivocal intention on the part of the West was always realized through its discursive productions. The other two critics do not seem to give enough direct power and role of 'agency' on behalf of the colonized people. Also, Bhabha's style is so involved that an oppositional stance does not come through and is obscured by the meanderings of language.

And yet the cumulative achievement of the three critics discussed in this unit has been really admirable. There is all around us a new cultural politics of difference with all its inner complexities and subtle nuances. One of the challenges for postcolonial theory today is to come to terms with specific local conditions and with comparison that can be discerned in and between them. There is also the daunting task of trying to know the story of colonial and neo-colonial engagements in all their complexity. Finding a proper language and terminology for representing those engagements is another major challenge. The three critics taken up here have done more than most others in indicating some of the directions that can be fruitfully followed, sometimes aided by poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Some more general charges, however, remain. Aijaz Ahmad an Indian critic objects that postcolonial theorists 'live and do their theories' in First World countries and that (in Ahmad's view) affects the impact of their work. Arif Dirlik sees the postcolonial intellectual as complicitous in feeding into the goals of the capitalist frame of postcolonial theory. Kwame Appaiah argues that the 'post' of postcolonial theory and ostmodernism are spaces created by capitalism to market cultural products in the developing world.

## 22.5 Summary

- Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha are said to be 'the Holy Trinity' of postcolonial theory. Having said that, it becomes important to point out that their work cannot be clubbed together in any homogeneous way. Each of them is different and important for the contributions she has made to the field. Said's main contribution to the field is the concept of 'orientalism' – the attempt on the part of the West to establish the East as lazy, deceitful and irrational. Spivak answers the question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' with a 'No'. Women are 'doubly effaced' in Spivak's scheme of things. Bhabha's theorizing about 'mimicry' builds on the potential for irreverence and mockery in the colonizer/colonized relationship. All three critics are influenced by Foucault's views on power and discourse. Additionally, Spivak is influenced by Derrida and Bhabha by Lacan. All three draw on other resources as well.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct options:

- Discourse of Language published in ..... .
 

(a) 1971	(b) 1961
(c) 1975	(d) 1985
- The first volume of the history of sexuality ..... .
 

(a) The will to knowledge	(b) Discipline and punish
(c) Discourse on language	(d) None of these
- Heart of Derridaness was written by ..... .
 

(a) Derrida	(b) Trilling
(c) Conrad	(d) None of these.

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## 22.6 Key-Words

1. Hegemony : In the work of the Italian Marxist thinker Gramsci, the word is used to account for the way in which a ruling class maintains itself in power.
2. Subaltern : Of lower rank.
3. Mimicry : The fact that the colonizer in his/her relationship with the colonized is always vulnerable to the irreverence and mockery beneath the seeming servility of the colonised.

## 22.7 Review Questions

1. What is the main argument of Edward Said's book Orientalism?
2. How have Foucault's view on discourse and power influenced Said's Orientalism?
3. What does Spivak mean by 'subalternity?' What distresses her about the condition of women in colonial societies?
4. What does Bhabha mean by 'mimicry' in the colonial context?

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (a)                      (iii) (c)

## 22.8 Further Readings



Books

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978. Culture and Imperialism. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillna, 1998.
3. Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.
4. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins (eds) *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989.
5. Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, London: Routledge, 1990.

## Unit 23: Gynocriticism and Feminist Criticism: An Introduction

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss the development as a Literary Critique.
- Explain the future of gynocriticism.
- Understand Feminist Criticism.

### Introduction

Gynocriticism is the historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition. Elaine Showalter coined this term in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics." It refers to a criticism that constructs "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" The work of gynocriticism has been criticized by recent feminists for being essentialist, following too closely along the lines of Sigmund Freud and New Criticism, and leaving out lesbians and women of color.

Gynocriticism is the study of feminist literature written by female writers inclusive of the interrogation of female authorship, images, the feminine experience and ideology, and the history and development of the female literary tradition. During the late eighteenth hundreds and early nineteenth hundreds respectively, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir began to review and evaluate the female image and sexism in the works of male writers. During the nineteenth sixties the feminist movement saw a reaction and opposition to the male oriented discourse of previous years. Most thoroughly developed during the late seventies and early eighties, gynocriticism was a result of the interrogative critiques utilised in post-structuralism and psychoanalysis.

### 23.1 Development as a Literary Critique

Gynocriticism developed as a literary critique from the theories and techniques of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. Post-structuralism is by nature, the study of the uncertain (Barry 2009). According to Barry, post-structuralism questions and interrogates the scientific certainty that structuralism took for granted, identifying the fact that language is ambiguous and therefore the

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universe is indeterminate. Psychoanalytic criticism focuses on the work of Freud, and the concept of the unconscious. The textual content is both conscious and unconscious and the critique involves the uncovering or decoding of the two. Additionally, Freudian psychoanalysis identifies repression and sublimation, two unconscious processes that involve the struggle with identity. Gynocriticism, examines the female struggle for identity and the social construct of gender. If gender is inherently constructed from an ideology, then that ideology is by nature, indeterminate and fluid, susceptible to the analysis of differences. According to Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the 'internalized consciousness' of the female. The uncovering of the female subculture and exposition of a female model is the intention of gynocriticism.

According to Showalter, literary history has seen three distinct phases of gynocriticism. Until the twentieth century, the female literature tradition was constructed of images and values of the idealized 'feminine', constructed from the patriarchal oppression that sought to identify the woman as "other". During the twentieth century, the 'feminist' movement saw a reaction to the patriarchy of previous times and protested the ideology of the feminine. The most recent development is the 'female' criticism, where a female identity is sought free from the masculine definitions and oppositions. The recognition of a distinct female canon and the development of the 'female reader' are fundamental aspects of gynocriticism.

### **23.2 Gynocriticism and Psychology**

Gynocriticism arose as a feminist critique as a result of the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective of the female inadequacy. According to Freudian psychology, the female possesses a psychological deficiency in the lack of male anatomy and as a result suffers envy and feelings of inadequacy and injustice combined with feelings of intellectual inferiority. However it is not just the physical female inadequacy that led to the inception of gynocriticism. The prejudice against the female, incites a specific noesis that becomes attributed to the female. Psychologist Karen Horney theorised that the ideal of woman is not necessarily innate to her sex but that the patriarchal pressures and cultural influence compel her to behave in conformity with the image. This prejudice has concealed the female literary tradition to the point of imitating the masculine.



*Did u know?* The male 'phallic prejudice' itself, creates a female consciousness that demands a critique of the female perspective.

### **23.3 Flaws as a Critique**

However gynocriticism aims to uncover a female psyche, it frequently fails to encompass the female as a whole. Often critics critique the feminist literature to the exclusion of other considerations such as race, class, social interest, political inclination, religion and sexuality. According to Friedman, the self 'is not singular, it is multiple'. Identity is not constructed of gender alone. The female encompasses other attributes such as race, class, sexuality etc. that are all subject to different positions of oppression and are in fact, related. The separation of these properties would create a one dimensional view of the female. However if gender and identity are merely constructs then it becomes difficult to assign any inherent qualities of nature or language by which to critique.

### **23.4 The Future of Gynocriticism**

Gynocriticism is a literary theory that is relatively new and continues to evolve. Until the patriarchal ideology of the female is resolved and gender inequality and social subjugation are neutralised, then it remains necessary to review and examine the female literary canon. Indeed, even when gender inequality is no longer an issue, interrogation of 'female' literature will remain valuable, as it is the study of sameness and difference in gender that delineates the 'female' literary theory.



## 23.5 Feminist Criticism: An Introduction

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Any survey of feminist criticism is fraught with difficulties, the most serious of which is the avoidance of reductionism. This introduction to feminist work attempts to identify key figures, central concerns, and general "movements." Such an attempt is a strategic move to organize a vital and growing body of work into some sort of scheme that can be collated and presented. Despite the existence of American, French, and British "feminisms," for example, no such clear-cut schools or movements exist in a fixed way. The various writers included in this essay, and the various trends and movements discussed, share many positions and disagree on many important points. Such agreements and disagreements have less to do with nationality than with the rapid changes occurring in feminist criticism. Three general perspectives on feminism are summarized here, as reflected in the work of American, French, and British writers. The work of two pivotal feminist writers, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, is discussed at some length, and there is also an attempt to isolate a few general trends and issues within the feminist movement.

Feminism has diverse goals, many of which overlap in the work of individual writers. This work is filled with pitfalls and temptations: Because women have been participants in their cultures, feminine thinking and writing cannot be separated from the methods of the cultures in which they have lived. Nor can a woman be separated from her race or sexual orientation. Furthermore, feminist criticism may be combined with other methods of criticism, such as deconstruction, psychoanalytic criticism, and Marxist criticism. Generally, however, feminist writers are concerned with encouraging the equality of women-political equality, social equality, and aesthetic equality-and researching the impact of gender upon writing-determining how the writing of women differs from the writing of men.

### Gender Systems

Feminist critics have produced a variety of models to account for the production, reproduction, and maintenance of gender systems. They discuss the female writer's problems in defining herself in the conventional structures of a male-dominated society, structures that restrict the possibilities of women and impose standards of behavior upon women personally, professionally, and creatively. Again, to generalize, once women experience themselves as subjects, they can attempt to undermine the social, cultural, and masculine subject positions offered them.

Feminist critics may, for example, reexamine the writing of male authors (an approach associated with American feminists) and, in particular, reexamine the great works of male authors from a woman's perspective in an attempt to discover how the great works reflect and shape the ideologies that hold back women. In this reexamination, feminist critics will carefully analyze the depictions of female characters to expose the ideology implicit in such characterizations. They may also seek to expose the patriarchal ideology that permeates great works and to show how it also permeates the literary tradition. This particularly American approach is seen in the work of Kate Millet, Judith Fetterley, and Carolyn Gold Heilbrun.



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In particular, the place within feminism of women of color is a controversial issue, as black writers such as Phillis Wheatley, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and others challenge and enter the canon. Other practitioners of gynocriticism include Patricia Meyer Spacks and Susan Gubar.

### Gynocriticism

A second approach used by American feminists is termed "gynocriticism." This method of inquiry takes as its subject the writings of women who have produced what Elaine C. Showalter, who coined the term "gynocriticism," calls "a literature of their own." A female literary tradition is

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examined to discover how women writers have historically perceived themselves and their cultures. Other goals of gynocriticism are to preserve and chronicle the history of women's writing and to rediscover lost or neglected women writers. Showalter describes feminine writing as a form of the general experience of minority cultures, cultures that are also "Others" and whose members are struggling to find a place usually reserved for white males. This leads to the problem of multiple marginalization, since some men and women may be Others in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation.

## Language

Feminist writers may also focus on language, defining it as a male realm, and exploring the many ways in which meaning is created. This language-based feminism is typically associated with French feminism. Such feminists may conceive of language as phallogocentric, arguing that it privileges the masculine by promoting the values appreciated by the male culture. Such a language-based approach typically attempts to reveal a relationship between language and culture, or, more specifically, the way the politics of language affects and even determines women's roles in a culture. Radical French feminists may associate feminine writing with the female body, so that the repression of female sexual pleasure is related to the repression of feminine creativity in general. They insist that once women learn to understand and express their sexuality, they will be able to progress toward a future defined by the feminine economy of generosity as opposed to the masculine economy of hoarding. Such a position has drawn criticism from other feminists, since it seems to reduce women to biological entities and fosters (though it reverses) a set of binary oppositions—female/male. Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, Xaviere Gauthier, and Marguerite Duras are four French feminists.

Interestingly, differences between the French and English languages involve complicated feminist issues. The English language distinguishes between sex and gender, so that human beings are either female or male by sex and feminine or masculine by gender. The feminine/masculine opposition permits some fluidity, so that androgyny can become a central, mediating position between the two extremes. The distinction between male and female, however, is absolute. The way the English language categorizes people has itself created a debate within feminism, over naming. In French, by comparison, the concepts of femininity and femaleness are included in the same word.

## Political and Social Agendas

Finally, British feminists have tended to be more historically oriented than French and American feminists. These British critics tend to be materialistic and ideological; they look carefully at the material conditions of historical periods and consider such conditions as central to understanding literature. Literature, in this model, is culturally produced. Some British feminists consider that an American opposition to male stereotypes has produced a feminine reaction that has led to an ignorance of real differences among women's races, social classes, and cultures. British feminists also emphasize that women's development of individual strategies to obtain real power within their political, social, or creative arenas is actually a negative move. They argue that such examples mystify male oppression and perpetrate the myth that, somehow, male oppression creates for women a world of special opportunities.

Generally, the British position encourages historical and political engagement to promote social change. This model of activism contrasts with the American and French models, which focus primarily on sexual difference. A typical strategy of the British approach is to examine a text by first placing the text in its historical context and then exposing the patriarchal ideologies that structure the text and govern the depiction of women characters. Because of historical oppression, the women characters tend to be either silent or mouthpieces for men's myths. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt are two examples of British feminists.

## History

Feminist criticism owes much to the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, two founders of contemporary feminist thought. De Beauvoir explored many ways in which women are defined

and limited in relation to men. Her most important work is probably *The Second Sex* (1949). Such limiting, de Beauvoir contends, cannot be avoided in a male-dominated culture; even women perceived as "independent" are still negatively affected by the ideas and the relations of the male society. Western society in general, for de Beauvoir, is patriarchal and denies freedom of expression to women. In this patriarchal society, women become Others, viewed not as they are but as projections of male needs and subordinate to male expectations. Her approach tends toward a Marxist model in identifying an economic and political limiting of women with sexism in literature. De Beauvoir finds in literature reflections of a more general socioeconomic oppression of women. Her approach emphasizes art's mimetic quality: Through its powers of reflection, art yields valuable insights into the sexism that is culturally prevalent.

The otherness examined by de Beauvoir and other feminist writers is a condition of women, so that the characteristic of identity for women is separation. Constituted through a male gaze, the feminine exists as something that is inexpressible. Women function as objects of the male gaze. Therefore, women's bodies are vehicles for ambivalent feelings toward the mother. These problems extend into the Western philosophical tradition, so that Western (usually male) thinkers express their philosophical positions as essential and universal while embracing a center that is unexamined and male.

In her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf introduced many topics that have become vital to feminist critics. She contends that art is a collective product, incorrectly romanticized in theory as individual and personal. Woolf's conceptualization of a metaphorical "room," a female place, merges the introspection often associated with female discourse and the social sanctuary within which a woman may achieve her potential. Woolf helped to establish the broad range of feminist criticism, from cultural critique to discourse. The most important portion of *A Room of One's Own* ironically and satirically traces the lost career of "Shakespeare's sister," whose creativity had no outlet in the sixteenth century. Woolf problematizes the structures of the male ego, its rituals, titles, and institutions, which are created at the expense of Others. This ironic introduction sets the stage in the text for a historical discussion of women writers and the problems they had in pursuing their careers. Furthermore, in her discussion of women novelists of the nineteenth century, especially George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Jane Austen, Woolf foreshadowed contemporary research on language.

Woolf argued that a woman writer should write as a woman writer and as a woman who is not self-conscious of her gender. She strove to be aware of the alienating and repressive effects of the myths created around women and also to avoid creating alternative myths. She set forth the attempt to discover a collective concept of subjectivity that would foreground identity constructs and argued that such a concept of subjectivity is a characteristic of women's writing. Other women writers, however, are more interested in the alienation created by structures that permit women only very restricted and repressive roles, roles as Others, in society.

In her writing, Woolf is striving, like later feminists, to uncover the effects of a phallogocentric culture that idolizes the autonomous and rational ego. She also attempts to offer an alternative to this idolatry, an alternative that emphasizes subjectivity and connectedness, if in a historically fluid context. Through her struggle to redefine women, she tries to avoid simply reversing the binary oppositions that polarize men and women into specific categories. She does not argue for a reversal of the categories.

## Gender Rules and Relations

Since de Beauvoir and Woolf, the naming and interrogating of phallogocentrism has become more assured. Feminist critics are challenging the stereotypical masculine virtues, no longer accepting them as measures of virtue and excellence. One strategy many feminist critics adopt is to locate both men and women within a larger context, as both being captives of gender in vastly different, but interrelated, ways. Though men may appear to be the masters under the rules of gender, they are not therefore free, for like women they remain under gender rules.

If both men and women are influenced by gender, then the conceptualizations of women and the conceptualizations of men must be examined in terms of gender relations. Feminist critical models are complex and often contradictory. Claims about the centrality of gender relations in the formation

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of self, knowledge, and power relations, and the relationships of these areas to one another, continue to be debated. Feminist critics have developed many theories on how gender systems are created, continue, dominate, and maintain themselves. Each of the theories, however, identifies a single process or set of processes as vital to gender relations. Influential feminist theorists have suggested the centrality of the sexual division of labor, childbearing and child-rearing practices, and various processes of representation (including aesthetic and language processes, for example). Such positions address the meanings and nature of sexuality and the relationship of sexuality to writing, the importance and implications of differences among women writers, and the effects of kinship and family organizations. Each of these many theories and debates has crucial implications for an understanding of knowledge, gender, power, and writing.

Juliet Mitchell has argued for the importance of Freudian theories to feminist theories of gender relations. Her work entails a defense of Lacanian psychoanalysis. She argues that Sigmund Freud's work on the psychology of women should be read as a description of the inevitable effects on feminine psychic development of patriarchal social power. Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow contribute to this psychoanalytical approach a larger account of the unconscious and its role in gender relations. They also examine the traditional sexual division of labor in the West, how this tradition has been passed on, and how it influences male-female relations.

### Male vs. Female Discourse

Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray find fundamental psychological differences between men and women. They have concluded that women are more influenced by pre-Oedipal experience and believe that the girl retains an initial identification with her mother, so that the relationship between mother and daughter is less repressed than that of the mother and son. This retention affects women's selves, so that they remain fluid and interrelational. As a result of this difference between men and women, masculine writing has an ambivalent response to women. Women tend to remain outside or on the fringes of male discourse, and feminine pleasure poses the greatest challenge to masculine discourse. Masculine discourse is also logocentric and binary; its meaning is produced through hierarchal, male-dominated, binary oppositions. Masculine discourse creates a situation in which feminine discourse is characterized by omissions and gaps. Latent in these gaps and omissions are conflicting feelings regarding sexuality, motherhood, and autonomy.

An important question raised by feminist criticism is whether there is a gender-based women's language that is significantly and inevitably different from the language of men. In *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff argues that there is more to "speaking like a woman" than vocabulary. Examining syntactical patterns of a typical female and evaluating the frequency with which women use tag questions, she concludes that the traditional powerlessness of women in a Western society is reflected in many aspects of women's language. Other theorists who are interested in differences between male and female languages explore sociolinguistic issues, such as the practice of women assuming their fathers' names at birth and their husbands' names when married, the frequency with which women are addressed by familiar names, the frequency of interruption in speech between men and women, and the large number of pejorative terms applicable to women. Writers interested in these latter linguistic areas are Cheri Kramarac and Julia Penelope Stanley.

In this conflict between male and female discourse, writing may be an anticipatory, therapeutic experience of liberation. Writing may return woman's repressed pleasure to her. It may also create a collective space in which women writers may speak of and to women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores discourse and literature in general as discursive practices. In *In Other Worlds* (1987) she shows the tendency in Western cultures to universalize particular examples into human examples. Spivak examines feminism in relation to British imperialism in India and then situates feminist criticism within middle-class academia. This approach argues that what has been assumed to be universal truth is in fact the Western colonial or male conception of truth, a perspective that distorts or ignores the experiences of Others. The goal of such a critical perspective is to authenticate the expression of Others based on individual experience and shared understanding and to call into question the accepted definitions of truth and meaningful discourse.

## Differences among Women

Another concern that has become important in feminist criticism is the differences among women themselves. A model that presumes a universal feminine experience requires that women, unlike men, be free from cultural and racial determination. Under such a model, the barriers to shared experience created by race and class and gender are somehow cleared away when one is a woman. Women critics of color, such as Barbara Smith, argue that it is incorrect to assume that there is one universal feminine experience or writing. For example, the sexuality of black women tends to be represented as natural, primitive, and free from traditional cultural inhibitions. Yet this assumption has been invoked both to justify and to deny the sexual abuse of black women and the lack of respect given to them. In general, Smith criticizes fellow feminists for excluding or ignoring women of color. She also observes that both black and white male scholars working with black authors neglect women.

Furthermore, it is not possible to discuss a universal experience of motherhood. Racism affects women of color differently from the way it affects white women, especially in the effort to rear children who can be self-sufficient and self-respecting. These troubles are inherent in a culture that holds as natural the binary opposition white/black, wherein white is the privileged term. This opposition is deeply rooted in the colonial history of Western civilization. Women of color cannot be exempt from the insidious consequences of this binary opposition, and white women cannot participate in productive dialogue with women of color whenever this traditional opposition is ignored.

## Lesbian Criticism

Another friction within the feminist movement involves lesbian feminist criticism. Just as women of color have considered themselves excluded, lesbian feminists consider themselves excluded, not only by the dominant white male culture but also by heterosexual females. Authors concerned with this problem include Bonnie Zimmerman and Adrienne Rich. In fact, Rich provides a definition of lesbianism so broad that it encompasses most of feminine creativity.

## Feminist Psychoanalytic Criticism

In the 1970's a general movement toward psychoanalysis and toward women's reading men and one another occurred within feminism. This movement is exemplified in the writings of such feminists as Mary Jacobs, Jane Gallop, and Juliet Richardson. For feminist theorists, the limitations of traditional theories accounting for the origins of oppression had been uncovered. Writers in the 1970's became very interested in, for example, the positioning of women within repressive sexual and political discourses. Many feminist writers have become interested in the establishment of an identity that involves both separation and connection, so that a binary relationship is not created and one is not perceived as a threat. In such a new relationship, women would no longer need, for example, to attempt to create an Oedipal triangle through their children. Each of the sexes might develop less threatening relations to the other.

## Reading Differences

In regard to women's reading men and one another, Annette Kolodny investigated methodological problems from an empiricist stance. She concludes that women, in fact, do read differently from men. Her "A Map for Rereading" (1980) examines how the two contrasting methods of interpretation of men and women appear in two stories and how the differences between masculine and feminine perspectives are mirrored in the reaction of the public to the two stories (Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers"). Judith Fetterley's work also presents a model for gender differences in reading. Her book *The Resisting Reader* (1978) argues against the position that the primary works of American fiction are intended, and written, for a universal audience and that women have permitted themselves to be masculinized in order to read these texts. One of the first steps, Fetterley contends, is for women to become resisting, rather than assenting, readers.



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### Varieties of Feminism

Feminism has engaged in and with other branches of criticism, including Marxist criticism and deconstruction. Nancy K. Miller and Peggy Kamuf, for example, have incorporated deconstructive approaches in their work. Judith Lowder Newton and Lillian Robinson have incorporated Marxism.

The movement toward alternative ways of writing, however, involves drastic changes in the relationship between public and private and the traditional opposition between emotional and rational. Such an attempt in literature was heralded by Woolf's writing (for example, *The Waves*, 1931 and *To the Lighthouse*, 1927) and may be read in the work of Muriel Spark (*The Hothouse by the East River*, 1973), Angela Carter (*The Passion of New Eve*, 1977), Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970), Alice Walker (*Meridian*, 1976), Marge Piercy (*Women on the Edge of Time*, 1976), Margaret Atwood (*The Edible Woman*, 1969), Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*, 1975), and Fay Weldon (*The Life and Times of a She-Devil*, 1983), among others since.

Perhaps the most agreed-upon accomplishment of feminist criticism (though even in this agreement there is caution) has been to find and identify a variety of feminine traditions in literature. Numerous women writers have been "rediscovered," introduced into the literary canon, and examined as important to the literary tradition. This interest in expanding the study of literature by women has had a significant impact in colleges and universities. Indeed feminist criticism, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, had joined with other traditions—Native American, African American, Asian American, gay and lesbian—in an ongoing effort to celebrate and express diversity in the ongoing investigation of identity.

### 23.6 The New Feminist Criticism

During the last decade, the influence of feminist literary theory and criticism has dramatically increased, not only changing the shape of literary studies but also substantially affecting work in other fields that are concerned with the definition of interpretive strategies. Because many significant essays first published in feminist and academic journals have not been widely available, there is cause to celebrate the publication of *"The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory"* edited by Elaine Showalter, one of its earliest exponents. The 18 essays here are important both in defining many areas of concern and disagreement that have chiefly occupied feminist critics in recent years and in suggesting some strengths and weaknesses of one of the primary theoretical approaches to have emerged.

The first section, "What Do Feminist Critics Want? The Academy and the Canon," usefully explores assumptions implicit in a literary tradition almost entirely white, male and middle class; it analyzes why women have been excluded from all accounts of literary influence and identifies and corrects misreadings of several works by women. The second section, "Feminist Criticisms and Women's Cultures," raises significant political and theoretical questions about the most appropriate focus for a feminist critical theory and methodology—the desirable relation of the theory to various forms of what has come to be referred to as "male discourse," and the theory's capacity to adequately represent the experiences and perspectives of women diverse in economic and ethnic background as well as in sexual orientation.

In identifying the qualities unique to women's writing—its points of social reference, its recurrent images, symbols and themes—the essays in the last part of the collection provide examples of good practice of theo-retical statements defined earlier in the volume.

Provocative insights and readings may be found throughout the book. Annette Kolodny contrasts the feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman with Edgar Allan Poe and discovers in Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" a revisionist reading of "The Pit and the Pendulum." Susan Gubar powerfully illuminates the works of several women writers (among them Isak Dinesen and H. D.) as she analyzes the metaphors and strategies through which they have explored their creativity. Bonnie Zimmerman struggles with the complexities of defining a lesbian literary esthetic; and Barbara Smith, in mapping the achievements and potential of black feminist criticism, offers

a stunning, if controversial, reading of Toni Morrison's "Sula." Lillian Robinson sets out the rationale for reformulating the literary canon; and Rosalind Coward's essay seeks to distinguish between feminist fiction and women's novels.

This collection will be generally appreciated for what it suggests about the nature and significance of feminist criticism in rectifying past errors of judgment. By focusing on women as readers and writers, virtually all of these critics have been able to reveal the distortions of what is referred to as "masculinist" bias. They also help us to redefine literary influence and reconceptualize literary history. They ask probing questions about the special nature of women's creativity, retrieving and placing in context the works of women poets and novelists who have been underestimated, misread or flatly ignored. BECAUSE her own theoretical position has determined her selection of the essays, however, Mrs. Showalter has been less successful in suggesting the existing range of theoretical and methodological approaches. Her view, developed in the two central essays of the collection, is that the proper study of women is women: that feminist critics should neither treat texts written by men nor draw their methodologies from a male-centered critical tradition. Her preference is for a "gynocriticism" that is "genuinely women-centered, independent, and intellectually coherent." She is concerned with the psychodynamics of female creativity which she observes in both the individual and collective habits of women writers. While Mrs. Showalter acknowledges that the national, racial, ethnic, sexual and personal differences that separate women from each other must also relate them socially, psychologically and economically to men, she does not wish to develop a methodology capable of exploring these complex interconnections.

Some of the critics whose work appears in the collection do not themselves share her perspective, but the book's selections nonetheless fall into the category of "gynocriticism." As a result, with the exception of an article by Nina Baym on how theories of American fiction exclude women authors, interpretive essays that examine texts by male authors are not included. Particularly unfortunate is the omission of representative essays that examine conjointly male and female texts that are both theoretical and literary. However, a number of feminist critics engaged in this project have not only given us fresh readings but, by helping us to understand the role of gender in determining basic interpretive patterns, have enabled us to develop a more complex understanding of human culture. The work of these critics calls for at the least a companion volume.

## Self-Assessment

### 1. Choose the correct options:

- (i) Gynocriticism is the study of feminist literature written by ..... .
- |                      |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| (a) male writers     | (b) female writers |
| (c) both (a) and (b) | (d) none of these  |
- (ii) A second approach used by ..... .
- |                      |                   |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| (a) feminist         | (b) gynocriticism |
| (c) both (a) and (b) | (d) none of these |

## 23.7 Summary

- Gynocriticism is the historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition. (Friedman 18) Elaine Showalter coined this term in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics." It refers to a criticism that constructs "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories"
- Gynocriticism developed as a literary critique from the theories and techniques of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. Post-structuralism is by nature, the study of the uncertain (Barry 2009).

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- Gynocriticism arose as a feminist critique as a result of the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective of the female inadequacy. According to Freudian psychology, the female possesses a psychological deficiency in the lack of male anatomy and as a result suffers envy and feelings of inadequacy and injustice combined with feelings of intellectual inferiority.
- A second approach used by American feminists is termed "gynocriticism." This method of inquiry takes as its subject the writings of women who have produced what Elaine C. Showalter, who coined the term "gynocriticism," calls "a literature of their own."

### 23.8 Key-Words

1. Female Self-Discovery : A literature of their own; stop imitating others = Gynocriticism.

### 23.9 Review Questions

1. What do gynocritics look for?
2. What are the links between women writers; how does female influence work?
3. Is there a coherent "muted" tradition?
4. What are the problems that have plagued attempts to define a "female" tradition or aesthetic?
5. What is a "female aesthetic"? -- The idea that women's art is different from men's, that they create differently.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (b)                      (ii) (b)

### 23.10 Further Readings



1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Reprint. New York: Random House, 1990.
2. Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. New York: Methuen, 1980.
3. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
4. Delany, Sheila. *Writing Women: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern*. New York: Schocken, 1984.
5. Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: Blackwell, 1988.
6. Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
7. Finkle, Laurie A. *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992.

## Unit 24: Features of Feminist Criticism

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand the concerns and features of feminist theories.
- Examine areas of sensitivity and difficulty.

### Introduction

I'd like to begin by recalling a fragment of a conversation from Jane Austen's last completed novel. *Persuasion*. It is a conversation between two friends, Captain Harville and Anne Elliot on the subject of constancy in love. As you will see, it begins with a reference to Captain Benwick, a common friend of theirs, whose situation they are discussing. It goes on however well beyond the personal. Captain Harville has just tried to tell Anne men's feelings are as strong and long-lasting as women's. Anne has disagreed.

'Well, Miss Elliot...we shall never agree, I suppose, upon this point. No man and woman would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you – all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side [of] the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs all talk of women's fickleness. But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men.'

'Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.' (*Persuasion* 1088-89)

Quite a few points jump out of this little snatch of conversation. *First* as Captain Harville suggests at the start, there is no beginning and no end to the dialogue between women and men. It is indeed one feature of human existence that cuts across all barriers of time and space. Feminist theories then are one set of manifestations of that dialogue. They do not live – sectioned-off – in a curriculum for you and me to study and teach. They are the blood and bone of life's ongoing debate in all eras and cultures, between as it were 'one half of the sky' and the other. **Next**, the logical development of this line of thought is that feminist theories – however intellectually inaccessible some may seem at first – are not wholly or even largely the concern of the academy. They are illustrations of how the world and the academy intervene in each other's lives. Look at the way in which the conversation veers and swings. Harville and Anne begin with a purely

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personal concern. Their friend has given up mourning for his dead fiancée and found a new love. But Harville does not let the matter rest here. He goes on to speak of books, their writers and of all those engaged in the arts. He moves, in other words, from the world of ordinary life to the academy in which literature is taught, assessed and marketed. Harville and Anne go back (after the extract cited here) to talk of the personal once more. **Thus** this suggests the way in which feminist theories 'happen'. For instance, the critical establishment for a very long time said that Austen (though she lived through the Napoleonic wars) never alluded to the 'great world outside' and wrote only about the sheltered world of family life. Yet look at how revolutionary ideas are quietly being nudged into place here. The notions that the literary establishment is not just male but likely to be male-biased as well, that women have been historically disadvantaged because education, history and literature have always been the preserve, and that therefore the academy (which produces and disseminates these studies) is suspect, are the stuff of which women's revolutions have been made. **All** these notions are articulated in this conversation.

Sometimes a revolution may happen in an obviously public arena: the Votes for Women movement in the Britain of the 1920's or the campaign for parliamentary seats for women in the India of the 1990's. At other times it may happen quietly in the give-and-take of a private conversation. That feminist theories seem to go underground at times, or speak largely in private space, is itself a comment on the way in which women have been silenced or marginalised at all times and in all places. **Also** look at the specifically literary aspects considered here. Literature concerns both women and men. So it is not only a case of men imbibing its gender-biases but also of women writers and readers being unknowingly conditioned by these biases. In this context therefore Anne is right to rule out an unmediated, *ad hoc* use of literature as a key to understanding life. Feminist theories try to identify such biases and then negotiate them by sensitising readers to their existence and organising strategies of resistance against such biases. **Besides**, examine the tone of this exchange again. Yes, the man and the woman are in an adversarial relationship in terms of ideas, but no, there is no hostility. Does this context of friendship help advance the feminist argument through means of friendly persuasion or does it retard the argument since persuasion can reduce radicalism? Woolf for instance is criticised for using persuasive, feminine charm to win over her readers. Logically, if culture-conditioning is granted, the debate is not between women and men, but between feminists and anti-feminists. **Finally** look once more at the conversation, not for the tone this time but for the structure, or the way in which it orders its thoughts. At the molecular level – the level of the sentence – do you think you would know it was written by a woman if you had no prior information that the author is Austen? Some theorists claim there is such a thing as 'a woman's sentence.' It is shaped so as to be deliberately personal, supple and easy as a response to the more public, ponderous and relatively hostile sentence of a man. Others suggest this kind of discrimination is itself an extension of gender-bias. What do *you* think?

## 24.1 Working Definition

### 24.1.1 Sex and Gender

I wouldn't like to offer you – even if I could construct it – a hard and fast definition of the nature of feminist theories. That would set parameters to an experience which I still think is exciting because its chief business is the stretching of parameters and the disturbing of received wisdom. I wouldn't wish, so to speak, to domesticate the terror. At the same time I would like to suggest some areas and sensitivities peculiar to feminist theories, and to play around with some of the applications of these theories. So I shall try to put two working definitions before you. Consider their areas of clarity and put question-marks over their areas of confusion. Here is the first:

...feminism is a political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda; to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them. (Morris, 1)



Please set aside the word 'political' for the moment [I will discuss it 23.1.2] and focus on the paired concepts of sex and gender. Sex here refers to the determining of identity on the basis of biological category, while gender connotes 'the cultural meaning attached to sexual identity. In other words, gender is the product of culture-conditioning. Thus women may be stereotyped as being compelled to have certain 'womanly' qualities which restrict them to a subordinate role. Celia in *Middlemarch* finds happiness much quicker than Dorothea since for her life centres around her own hearth and home like that of a much-petted kitten. Dorothea steps out of the role nineteenth-century English provincial life offers her by trying to enter the homes of others, as a social worker or would-be architect. As a result her own home-centred happiness is that much harder to find. Sex-difference (the notion of the woman as reproducer) sanctions gender-difference (the notion that a woman must set up a family as her chief priority) which in turn requires punishment. *Middlemarch* society is that much more harsh to Dorothea because of her refusal to conform.

This is heart-rending. Simultaneously however even as feminist theorising – the sex-gender distinction in this case – uncovers these biases in cultural history, by drawing the attention of readers to these biases it helps resist them. Eliot's own conclusion to the novel can be read as a sell-out to culture-conditioning. Dorothea is perhaps the only one to believe in her own happiness. The remake of *Middlemarch* for BBC television in the 1990's though was interesting because it showed a conclusion more resistant to gender-bias. The visuals were those of provincial placid society and against this the conclusion of the novel was read out in a voice-over. This suggested an author disturbed and disappointed by her society. The priority of making readers uncover hidden biases in a text and in a sense thus re-writing a text is part of the revisionary imperative (or the need to bring about change) that is crucial to feminist theories.

### 24.1.2 Politics and Ideology

How are such biases created and sustained? More specifically what are the institutions that make gender-bias possible? The conversation cited in referred to education, history and literature. If these forces are put together they suggest the collective presence of the academy: the collective term to describe the study, teaching and publishing of the arts and the sciences. Feminist theories range themselves against various structures and inter-relationships of power – the state, the church, law and the academy – which they see as patriarchal. To be patriarchal is to sustain and act out the belief that both nature and culture make men superior to women. To combat patriarchy – which may be the basis of many institutions – is to call for action as the definition in 24.1.1 does. The definition I am going to put before you now, I think, sets out some of the action itself.

The first step is to recognise that politics is not the sole preserve of professionals called politicians. On the contrary ... 'everything is politics,' especially those things which claim or are claimed to be apolitical like those 'truths' which great literature is said to embody, and which still get labelled 'universal' .... 'Politics' in this wider sense means 'power' or rather 'power relations': who does what to whom and in whose interests. And because human relationships are necessarily interpersonal, 'the personal is the political' ... to read a canonical text in a feminist way is to force that text to reveal its hidden sexual ideology ... (Ruthven 30-1)

I will try to apply these ideas to a novel you have studied so as to clarify them. *Tom Jones* is – among other things – about a hero's quest for wisdom symbolised in the name of the heroine Sophia (meaning wisdom) whom he ultimately marries. A man's quest for wisdom is usually presented as a universal truth about life. Here it takes on the added dimension of the personal – a lover's quest for his beloved. Supposing though I argue that it is not universal and not merely personal but political, I could say it deals with patriarchal structures of power and the relationships between them. I might say that Fielding's readers (both women and men) demanded novels that re-inforced the gender-stereotypes that men can experiment but women must conform. Fielding's publisher (according to this reading) would want to give the readers what the latter would like to buy and read. So of course Fielding the writer creates a loving, patient, wise woman and a man who is eternally forgiven. Thus structures of power – which are therefore described as political –

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operate to re-inforce gender-stereotypes. They compel readers, writers and publishers to demand and produce such stereotypes endlessly. Unless alerted by feminist theorists subsequent readers of the text – who may go on to teach and prescribe it – will share its own inadequacies and ideology. 'Ideology is that never fully articulated system of assumptions by which a society operates, and which permeates everything it produces, including of course what is deemed to be literature'. At which points can feminist theories engage with patriarchal ideology so as to challenge it? Are these areas themselves problematic?

## **24.2 Concerns of Feminist Theories**

### **24.2.1 While Reading**

Reading – which includes studying and teaching – is a cultural practice organised and mediated by the academy. The academy controls reading by means of the syllabus it constructs. This syllabus reflects in turn the canon: the body of texts it values enough to recommend. Like all other structures of power, the canon projects and confirms the cultural biases of those who construct it. '... canons are complicit with power; and canons are useful in that they enable us to handle otherwise unmanageable historical deposits. They do this by affirming that some works are more valuable than others, more worthy of minute attention ...'. In 24.1.2, I suggested how patriarchy might influence and shape a single text. Now try to imagine how patriarchy might determine a body of texts down the ages. It might suggest that only texts which had an arbitrarily determined value – say in terms of grandeur or length – ought to be included. This in turn would ensure the inclusion of certain genres such as the epic – with its emphasis on public action and high cultural significance – and the exclusion of others – the short story, say, with its emphasis on private space and domesticity. Now try to think of what this exclusion means. Traditionally women have used the short story which requires a brief absence only from work, and a (relatively) less format or 'classical' education which have frequently been all they can afford. The exclusion of a genre in which women have often been ahead of men is only one way in which the canon confirms patriarchy. Try now to think of other ways. The canon may include in a syllabus only texts of confirmed 'greatness' as compulsory and include women's writing in an optional paper which may be omitted. In this course you and I are lucky to have a 'well-established' romantic like Wordsworth along with Wollstonecraft who is one of those rescued from oblivion by feminist theorists and almost forcibly brought to the notice of the academy. Feminist theories try to 'take over' the canon and rescue it from patriarchy by helping readers scan texts, genres or movements so as to relentlessly make visible the components of gender and gender-bias in the academy which has so far tried to conceal them.

### **24.2.2 While Writing**

The best-known articulation of this problem comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning a Victorian poet who said in 1845 'England has had many learned women ... and yet where are the poetesses?... I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none' (Walder 27). Another poet Emily Dickinson lamented over a similar problem in the United States of 1862 'They shut me up in Prose – As when a little Girl / They put me in the closet / Because they liked me "still"' (ibid). There are *two* problems with reference to these gaps in literary ancestry. For *one* thing it can make women writers feel at a disadvantage when compared to their male counterparts because to not feel part of a tradition can breed a sense of impoverishment and deprivation. As a contemporary poet Adrienne Rich complains 'this is one of the ways ... in which women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own' (Ruthven 124). For **another**, movements lose their radical capacity for change when they are made to seem sporadic and unorganised. As Dickinson points out, to be restricted to a genre which is not of one's choice – prose as against verse in her case – is to reduce a writer's potential for creatively rebellious writing. By rewriting histories of literature so as to free these of gender bias, by reconstructing syllabi (so that say, Premchand and Ismat Chughtai get read in a course on Indian writing), by

retrieving genres in which women have excelled (diary-writing, the short story) and by publishing women's writing (the Virago Press in the U.K, the Feminist Press in the U.S and Kali for Women in India, to name a few) feminist theories create a space for women writers.

## 24.3 Grey Areas in Feminist Theories

### 24.3.1 While Practising

There are certain areas which are problematic or grey areas in feminist theories. Ought these theories to be applied across all cultures? After all women as a class account for at least fifty percent of all cultures and there is an irreducible minimum of women's experience common to all times and places. At the same time is it not culturally unacceptable to market theory constructed by the Western academy as if it is equally valid across the Indian subcontinent as if theory were another multinational product? Look at the following remark: 'How then, can one learn from and speak to the millions of illiterate rural and urban women who live "in the pores of capitalism inaccessible to the capitalist dynamics that allow us our shared channels of communication, the definition of common enemies?'

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, who made this comment has been herself described as a 'Marxist feminist American academic, trained in literary deconstruction, [who] was born in India, and thus writes at the intersection of cultural and intellectual tensions' (Morris 166). In other words the experience of women is not wholly the same across all cultures. Some cultures are capitalistic or free-enterprise cultures which provide the illusion at least of choice. Others are state controlled. Literacy levels vary both within and across cultures. Feminist theorists approach the discipline from a variety of other theoretical backgrounds [of which more will be said in 23.3.2] All these points suggest that no easy essentialism should enter feminist criticism or create a totalising narrative that wipes out cultural difference or even set up the experience of the Western academy as normative. At the same time this problem should not inhibit theorists or cause theory to retreat. For to do this would mean that the very conspiracy of silence patriarchy creates around genres, movements or cultures that are women-centred will be continued. Feminist theories I think should articulate such silences. Even if it means acknowledging they cannot speak **for** or **to** a culture with any great authority, they should speak **of** it however haltingly. What do **you** feel?

### 24.3.2 While Theorising

Feminist criticism – like other forms of literary theory – relates across critical boundaries as well. Simone de Beauvoir always claimed for instance that as a marxist she was primarily interested in a class-based analysis which treated women as a class among the oppressed all over the world rather than in the condition of women in itself. New historicists – of whose work Edward Said's *Orientalism* is an example – have a vexed relationship with feminist theories. On the **one** hand a colleague of Said's found it useful to build a parallel between his work and hers: 'I realised, in reading his book that ...far more than Arabs internalised the western view [of their inferiority] women have internalised the male view of themselves' (Showalter 26). On the **other** Aijaz Ahmad a marxist has criticised Said for limiting his focus to race while erasing class and gender as factors of oppression. Feminist theories then, cannot only develop an ethic of suffering. They must think, intervene and reshape the academy and the world.

## 24.4 Possible Application

Now turn to the poem by Kamala Das please and give it a quick read, keeping in mind the theoretical issues discussed in this unit. For instance take a look at the opening: 'I don't know politics but I know the names / Of those in power, and can repeat them like / Days of the week or names of months, beginning with / Nehru ... I think the ironic opening (along with the title) works on the level of an ironic disclaimer. It sets itself out as an introduction to the woman writer

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but immediately suggests how apart from the public arena is the private world of the woman writer. Look at the way the problems of cultural difference appear. 'I am Indian, very brown born in / Malabar I speak three languages, write in / Two, dream in one...' An inhabitant of this world of power-structures (the world of politics) is a mockery of meaning as a mindless catalogue of days or months would be. The woman writer is condemned to a history she has not helped shape by an education she has not had, isn't she ? Look also at the relationship indicated between sex and gender. Sex is the category based on natural or biological instinct : 'I was child and later they / Told me I grew for I became tall...' In contrast gender is a culture-conditioned construct which has everything to do with the expectations and rules imposed by society on the individual 'I wore a shirt and my / Brother's trousers, cut my hair short...' I think the pressures of the academy are worked in rather cleverly. A chorus of self-styled literary critics try to tell poet the way in which she should position herself. 'Be Amy, or be Kamala or better / Still, be Madhavikutty ...' Each of these literary identities has specific choices and implications which shape it, I think there is the western role-model, the autobiographical **and** the poet who writes in the regional language respectively mentioned here. The poet thus finds people attempting to choose her literary ancestors for her, and this choice in its turn is an effort to force her present and future into manageable categories. How do you think a patriarchy pressures the individual woman writer in this poem to conform? See 24.2.2 for the parallel with any of the poets cited there and also look out for the pun on 'still' (don't move **and** don't rebel) which is the same as that in the quotation from Dickinson.

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) Jane Ansten's last completed novel was ..... .
  - (a) imma
  - (b) pride and prejudice
  - (c) persuasion
  - (d) none of these
- (ii) The votes for women movement in the Britain took place in ..... .
  - (a) 1920s
  - (b) 1930s
  - (c) 1940s
  - (d) none of these

**24.5 Summary**

- Feminist theories begin – it seems to me – as one manifestation of an ongoing dialogue between women and men. They illustrate the way in which the world and the academy intervene in the lives and processes of each other.
- The revolutions that make feminist theories possible (and vice versa) do not always happen in the public domain.
- Education, history and literature – which are public institutions have belonged to men for much longer than to women. Feminist literary theories identify the gender-biases of literature and thus help both women and men defeat these biases by reading against them.
- The argument is not so much between women and men as it is between feminists and anti-feminists. One pair of components recurring in feminist theories is that of sex (based on biological difference) and gender (the result of culture-conditioning).
- Politics refers to the power structures feminist theories try to combat and ideology to the invisible but inherent theoretical assumptions that govern a society. Patriarchy is the ideology committed to male supremacy and is combated by feminist theories which show up gender biases in the reading and writing of literatures.
- Feminist theories negotiate problems of cultural difference and of relationship with other forms of criticism such as marxism and new historicism. These use class and race respectively as means to scan literature rather than gender.

## 24.6 Key-Words

Notes

1. Aesthetic of suffering : The reduction of women to the status of passive victims
2. Orientalism : Said's coinage to describe the reductive way in which the West has represented the East so as to colonise and exploit it

## 24.7 Review Questions

1. Outline the structures of power mentioned in the conversation between Anne Elliot and Captain Harville that feminist theories challenge.
2. What are the implications of the distinction between sex and gender as set by feminist theories?
3. Use 'An Introduction' to discuss the problems faced by feminist theories.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (c)                      (ii) (a)

## 24.8 Further Readings



Books

1. Ruthven, K.K. *Feminist literary studies : an Introduction*. 1984, repr. Cambridge, C.U.P., 1990.
2. Morris, Pam. *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*. Oxford : Blackwell, 1993.
3. Walder, Dennis (ed.) *Literature in the Modern World : Critical Essays and Documents*. Oxford : O.U.P., 1990.



## Unit 25: Gynocriticism and Feminist Criticism: Analysis

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Introduce Gynocriticism.
- Discuss the contribution of Gynocriticism.

### Introduction

The feminist study of women's writings. The term is sometimes used to mean any literary criticism devoted to works written by women. More often, it designates a body of literary criticism principally produced by academic feminists in the United States between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s that sought to characterize imaginative writing by women in contrast to canonical literature written by men. Gynocriticism celebrated a distinctive "voice" in women's literature across genres and periods that it explained in terms of women's cultural position as an oppressed group; of women's experiences, especially experiences of male domination and of female bonding; and of psychological traits supposedly typical of women such as empathy and fluid ego boundaries. This approach, sometimes simplistically labeled "American feminist criticism," pioneered feminist literary history and established a canon of women's literature influential in teaching, publishing, and scholarship. By broadly endorsing women's creativity, gynocriticism overlaps "cultural feminism."

Gynocriticism's most important precursor is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which posed influential questions about "women and literature." Following Woolf, American feminists of the late 1960s and thereafter saw imaginative literature as an important force affecting women. While some scholars attacked male writers for stereotyping women, other feminists sought role models and found energizing identifications in female characters drawn by women writers. For example, in 1972 Nancy Burr Evans rejoiced to see her "own experiences mirrored" in fiction by women (in *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon). Similarly, Louise Bernikow's *Among Women* (1980) and Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming a Heroine* (1982) emphasized the satisfactions of reading women writers who portrayed female friendships and women's search for identity.

Compared with the long tradition of the feminist practice or women's liberation, feminist literary criticism is a modern criticism approach that just started in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chief pioneers of this approach are English writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). They firstly had an insight into the twist of the female image and sexism in the male writers' works. This initiated the pursuing of the female reading and writing in the feminist criticism. Since 1960s, Kate Millet with her *Sexual Politics* made the feminist literary criticism

become a theoretical branch. American poet and writer Adrienne Rich, Mary Ellmann; professors Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Elaine Showalter; French writer Helene Cixous and English psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell also contributed a lot. In this period, feminist criticism transformed from the "Female Aesthetic" to "Gynocritics." After 1980s, feminist literary criticism got to the way of finding the self of female and affirming the self. The theorists in this period, for example, Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak implied poststructuralism, psychoanalysis to explore the gender theory. Till now, after a series of ideological trend, feministcriticism was to find a kind of "discourse," which is neither masculine nor feminine, but exists in a "third" form. From the history of theoretical feminism, we usually divided it into two parts, the Anglo-American and the French. These two parts have different theoretical backgrounds, study objects and research methods: American and English critics have for the most part engaged in empirical and thematic studies of writings by and about women; on the other hand, the most prominent feminist critics in France, have been occupied with the theory of the role of gender in writing, conceptualized within various post-structural frames of, and above all Jacques Lacan's reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis in terms of Saussure's linguistic theory. Here, we shall mainly go into the Anglo-American feminism, which may be divided into three phases: criticism of male sexism in the "androtexts," discovery of the women writers in history or spade works for "gynotexts," and feminist discourse for female identity. The first phase is concerned with woman as reader with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature, and with the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes.

## 25.1 A Brief Introduction to Gynocriticism

Towards a feminist poetics (1979) for an appropriate form of feminist criticism, namely, the type which is concerned with woman as writer with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. There is no term existing in English for such a specialized discourse, so Showalter adapted the French term *lagynocritique*.



Task

Why gynocriticism considered more positive if we compare it to feminism?

Gynocriticism is a criticism which concerns itself with developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women, in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, and interpretation, and in all literary forms, including journals and letters. To be more specific, according to Elaine Showalter, it is a program which "to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (Showalter, *Towards a feminist poetics*, 1979). Notable books in this mode include Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The female imagination* (1975), on English and American novels of the past three hundred years; Ellen Moers' *Literary women* (1976), on major women novelists and poets in England, America, and France; Elaine Showalter's *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977); and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar' *The madwoman in the attic* (1979). Moers' *Literary women* (1976) was "a preliminary sketching in or 'mapping' of this kind" (Selden 1997, p. 135). In Showalter's *A literature of their own* (1977), she "outlines a literary history of women writers (many of whom had, indeed, been 'hidden from history'); produces a history which shows the configuration of their material, psychological and ideological determinant; and promotes both a feminist critique (concerned with women readers) and a 'gynocritics' (concerned with women writers)" (Selden, 1997, p. 135). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar 's *The madwoman in the attic* (1979) stresses especially the psychodynamics of women writers in the nineteenth century. Its authors propose that the "anxiety of authorship," resulting from the stereotype that literary creativity is an exclusively

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male prerogative, effected in women writers a psychological duplicity that projected a monstrous counter figure to the idealized heroine, typified by Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*; such a figure is "usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). There are three main concerns of gynocriticism. One concern is to identify what are taken to be the distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women? the world of domesticity, for example, or the special experiences of gestation, giving birth, and nurturing, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations? in which personal and affectional issues, and not external activism, are the primary interests. Another concern is to uncover in literary history a female tradition, incorporated in sub-communities of women writers who were aware of, emulated, and found support in earlier women writers who in turn provide models and emotional support to their own readers and successors. A third undertaking is to show that there is a distinctive feminine mode of experience, or "subjectivity," in thinking, feeling, valuing, and perceiving oneself and the outer world. Related to this is the attempt to specify the traits of a "woman's language," or distinctively feminine style of speech and writing, in sentence structure, types of relations between the elements of a discourse, and characteristic figures and imagery. Some feminists have turned their critical attention to the great number of women's domestic and "sentimental" novels, which are noted in derogatory fashion in standard literary histories, yet which dominated the market for fiction in the nineteenth century and produced most of the best-sellers of the time; instances of this last critical enterprise are Elaine Showalter's *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) on British writers, and Nina Baym's *Woman's fiction: A guide to novels by and about women in America, 1820-1870* (1978). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have described the later history of women's writings in *No man's land: The place of the woman writer in the twentieth century*. Just as Showalter said, "gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions, and consciousness of women" (Showalter, 1979).

## **25.2. The Contribution of Gynocriticism**

The main tasks of gynocritics are to reorder the list of literary canon and uncover some "silent" female writers; to analyze "female creativity" and the specificity of female literary tradition. Based on these tasks, the contribution of gynocriticism can be found in many areas in feminist criticism. We will discuss its contribution from three aspects: the object, theoretical achievement, and quality of its study.

### **The Object of Gynocriticism: Reordering of the Literary Canon**

The goal of gynocriticism is to enlarge and reorder the literary canon that is, the set of works which by accumulative consensus, have come to be considered major and to serve as the chief subjects of literary history, criticism, scholarship, and teaching. In a *literature of their own*, Showalter uncovered a group of female writers. However, she neglected the black and lesbian female writers. But soon, the feminist critic discovered their careless omission, and they began to "excavate" the black and lesbian female writers and their works. All in all, in gynocriticism, feminist studies have served to raise the status of many female authors who are more or less scanted by scholars and critics and to bring into purview other authors who have been largely or entirely overlooked as subjects for serious consideration. Some feminists even have devoted their critical attention especially to the literature written by lesbian writers, or that deals with lesbian relationships in a heterosexual culture. The discovery of the general female writers and their literary works makes the feminist criticism even the whole literary criticism more comprehensive.

## The Theoretical Achievement of Gynocriticism

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Idea about "female subculture" Showalter finds that because of the phallic prejudice, the female writers are easily to be submerged in the river of literary history. Then she raised the assumption of "female subculture" which has its own subjects and images. Showalter emphasized, "Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalized consciousness of women" (Showalter, 1979). Based on the development of female consciousness, Showalter "identified three historical phases of women's literary development: the 'feminine' phase (1840-1880), during which women writers imitated the dominant tradition; the 'feminist' phase (1880-1920), during which women advocated minority rights and protested; and the 'female' phase (1920), during which dependency on opposition – that is, on uncovering misogyny in male texts is being replaced by a rediscovery of women's texts and women" (Guerin, 2004, p. 198). This is also the track of the growth of female subculture. In the first phase, female writers imitated the traditional mode of mainstream culture; in the second phase, female writers began to oppugn these traditional value rules; the third phase is the self-discovering period, female writers began to search their own identity without relying on the opposition with male. The idea about "female subculture" apposes the long time oppression of the female consciousness in the phallic society. This idea also enlightens the later feminist critics to probe into the female aesthetic more comprehensively.

### The Theory on "female creativity".

The mad woman in the attic (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar rebuilt the visage of female literary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also tried to find out the essence of female creativity – whether it is the female nature or the femininity which is constructed by the social culture. Though the comprehensive study of the brief female writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gilbert and Gubar found that the creativity was defined as masculine. Their concept "anxiety of authorship," used to describe nineteenth-century women writers like Harold Bloom's male-applied term "anxiety of influence" – derives from Freud's psychosexual paradigm of the Oedipus complex. If women follow a normative female resolution of the Oedipus complex, the father (the male literary tradition) becomes the object of female desire, and the pre-Oedipal desire for the mother (or her literature) is renounced. Twentieth-century women writers have the option of the "affiliation complex," which allows them to "adopt" literary mothers and to escape the male "belatedness," or the "anxiety of influence" theorized by Bloom, which is in effect a biological imperative for literary descent from an originatory father. Normative resolution of the Oedipus complex may leave women anxious about the fragility of paternal power, worried about usurping paternal primacy, and fearful of male vengeance. The resulting "masculinist complex" grants autonomy, a new maternal relation, and the creative option of male mimicry – a departure from Freud's negative judgment. However, in 19<sup>th</sup> century, because of the patriarchal literary creativity, the right of creating female image of female writers' own has been deprived. Then, the female writers must create some "immutable" female images according with the patriarchal standard to meet the masculine yearning. On the contrary, the ideal women quality is hidden in the monstrous figures such as Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre.

This figure is a counter-figure to the idealized heroine, but it is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Based on this, Gilbert and Gubar answered the question about female creativity. They deepen the significance of these "madwomen," and treat them as the creative impetus of female writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> even 20<sup>th</sup> century. These madwoman or monster repeatedly created by women writers is the author's double, expressing her anxiety, rage, and "schizophrenia of authorship" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 78). They detect asymmetrical male and female responses to the rise of female literary power. Women have emerged from their liminal position in the attic to wage the battle between the two genders. The contribution of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is mainly on theoretical level. Their novel way of theoretical research enlightens a lot of feminist critics. Their work stands on the first stage of the change of feminist criticism. At this time, feminist criticism began their real literary and textual analysis.

### 25.3 The Quality of Gynocriticism

Compared with French feminist criticism, the gynocriticism was not so thoughtful. However, the quality of gynocritical study is also very significant. That is, their great attention to the real world. They always bear the intention of considering the historical and social elements in their study of literary works in mind. Though we emphasize that feminist criticism should raise their theoretical level, the feminist critics should still carry on this study quality. Only in this way, can feminist criticism develop in the right direction.

#### **Self-Assessment**

##### **Choose the correct options**

- The Chief pioneers of Gynocriticism is
 

(a) Elain Showlater	(b) Virginia Woolf
(c) Simone de Beauvoir	(d) None of these
- Sexual politics was written by
 

(a) Kate Millet	(b) Mary Ellmann	(c) Juliet Mitchell	(d) None of these
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- A Room of one's own published in
 

(a) 1920	(b) 1929	(c) 1930	(d) 1935
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### 25.4 Summary

- Gynocriticism is the transitional period of feminist criticism, especially the Anglo-American feminist criticism.
- This special status entrusts gynocriticism complex study method, object, and quality; also leads abundant theoretical achievement.
- The feminist critics of gynocriticism form their own peculiar study style, and a connecting link between the first phase led by Virginia Woolf and the third phase mixing with psychoanalysis and post-structuralism.
- It has great contribution to the developing of feminist criticism in many aspects. That is what we try to find out in this paper.

### 25.5 Key-Words

- Feminist criticism : Feminist criticism seeks on the one hand to investigate and analyze the differing representations of women and men in literary texts and, on the other hand, to rethink literary history by exploring an often marginalized tradition of women's writing. Feminist criticism is concerned to question and challenge conventional notions of masculinity and femininity; to explore ways in which such conventions are inscribed in a largely patriarchal canon; and to consider the extent to which writing, language and even literary form itself are themselves bound up with issues of gender difference.

### 25.6 Review Questions

- Discuss of the concept of Gynocriticism.
- What are the contribution of Gynocriticism? Explain.
- Explain the theoretical achievement of Gynocriticism.



## Answers: Self-Assessment

Notes

1. (b)                      2. (a)                      3. (b)

## 25.7 Further Readings



Books

1. Abrams, M. H. 2004: A glossary of literary terms Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press
2. CHEN Xiao-lan. 1999: Feminist criticism and the interpretation of feminist literature. Lanzhou: Dunhuang Literature and Art Press.(in Chinese)
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4. HU Jing-zhi. 2003: The classic writings of western literature theory. Beijing: Beijing University Press. (in Chinese)
5. Gilbert, Sandra M. & Gubar, Susan. 1979: The madwoman in the attic: The women writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
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7. Wilfred L. 2004: A handbook of critical approaches to literature. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
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10. Elaine. 1985: Towards a feminist poetics, the new feminist criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory. New York: Pantheon Books.

## Unit 26 : Elaine Showalter: Four Models of Feminism in 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness'

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to :

- Analyse Elaine Showalter's 1981 essay, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' with reference to the position of women teachers and critics vis-a-vis the academy.

### Introduction

American theorist Elaine Showalter, born in 1941 studied at Bryn Mawr College, an Ivy League institution and the University of California. As teacher and researcher in English and Women's Studies she has been at various American universities, including Rutgers and Princeton. She has worked on literary history, having published *A Literature of Their Own : Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) and on the relationship between women's literatures and the women's movement in the United States.

In a 1979 essay, Showalter hijacks a stuffy patriarchal description by Leon Edel of the archetypal American feminist theorist'... an auburn-haired young woman, obviously American, who wore ear-rings and carried an armful of folders and an attache case' (Showalter, 125). Showalter's wry response I think suggests – underneath the comedy – the difficulties of her position.

I suppose we should be grateful that at least one woman ... makes an appearance in this [imaginary] gathering, even if she is not invited to join the debate. I imagine that she is a feminist critic – in fact, if I could afford to take taxi to the British Museum [the site of this gathering] I would think they had perhaps seen me – and it is pleasing to think that while the men stand gossiping in the sun, she is inside hard at work. But these are scant satisfactions when we realise that of all the approaches to English studies current in the 1970's, feminist criticism is the most isolated and the least understood.

*First* there is the problem of the woman scholar trying to position herself in the academy which is patriarchal in the assumptions it makes and the power-structures through which it deals. A woman-researcher can only seem a caricature to such an academy, a deviation from the norm or an absurd travesty. *Next* there is the way in which such a woman scholar creates space for herself. Showalter begins by inverting assumptions made by patriarchy. Patriarchy depends on the notion that what men do is important. Women either idle or gossip. Showalter stands this idea on its head. *Then* there is the problem of an American gate crashing the academy which so far – even as the prescribed

theorists suggest – has been dominated by Europeans so far. *Finally* there is the isolation that suggests how problematic it is for feminist theories to relate to any other critical school (s). Is this isolation enabling or disabling? It becomes increasingly problematic as feminist theories develop.

I will return to this early essay – 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' but just for now I'd like to make one quick point concerning Showalter. How far or how close do *you* think Showalter is from Woolf's original constituency?. Perhaps a quick look at the context in which she writes will suggest an answer.

## 26.1 Social and Cultural Background

### 26.1.1 The Age

With the end of the Second World War, international political and economic influence had shifted away from Britain – whose Empire was declining. The new superpowers, the United States and the (then) Soviet Union were emerging. The period of the Cold War – the hostility between these two power blocs – followed. This period was punctuated by various crises such as the Berlin Blockade, the Cuban crisis, the Korean and Vietnam wars followed. During this time the American campus life tried to provide sites of alternative culture to the capitalism of the establishment. When the United States military intervened in Vietnam many American campuses became centres of the peace movement and were critical of the government. In 1968, the 'Paris Spring' or the young people's movement across Europe in favour of peace and liberation was echoed by similar movements in American campuses. The 1970's and 1980's saw an explosion in the field of critical theory in American campuses especially with reference to women's writing and to African-American literature. Outside the academy the Women's movement and the Black power movement had begun a long time before this. But within the academy, the theoretical bases of these movements were developed most extensively during the seventies and the eighties, in other words, during the time of a great deal of Showalter's work. This was also the time when the American academy consolidated its response to European challengers in the field of theory. What – if anything – is likely to have been the effect of these pressures on the women's movement and on the question of women's writing?

### 26.1.2 Position of Women

Within the academy – and this is primarily Showalter's context – this is a fraught issue. Feminist theories by this time have formulated three central questions around which – by and large – the debate is structured. These are set out most clearly perhaps in Annette Kolodny's 1980 essay 'Dancing Through the Minefield : Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism. I will list the propositions as Kolodny does, and then offer a quick gloss of my own.

1. *Literary history (and with that, the historicity of literature) is a fiction*
2. *Insofar as we are taught to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms.*
3. *Since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses.*

In other words, by the time Showalter's prescribed essay is written, the three points established in the American academy concerning feminist theories on which there is general agreement are respectively : feminist theories are about the reconstruction of the canon so as to reclaim a stronghold of patriarchy , the sensitising of readers to paradigms or theoretical models – concealed within texts – based on gender-conditioning , and the role of theory in changing the way in which readers interpret texts. Moreover in terms of bread-and-butter positioning, Women's Studies had by this time become a recognised discipline at American universities. Conferences were being held, journals published, and syllabi framed on feminist theories. What could have been amiss?

## 26.2 The Text

### 26.2.1 Its Constituency

'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,' it seems to me addresses women and men within the academy – who are anxious about a specific problem. Should feminist theories concern themselves with constructing a common methodology or should they not? The constituency then is a small specific one comprising literary theorists. Of course not all are feminists. Some are primarily Marxists who prioritise class over other factors when discussing the ways in which books are written. Others may be theorists either from amongst African-Americans or from the developing world who feel their cultural histories are excluded from theoretical work since hitherto this work has been carried out by Caucasian women from the developed world. All share an interest in theory of one kind or another. All are exercised by one central issue. Should feminist theories continue to remain open-ended and refuse to commit themselves to any *one* structural framework? The advantage of this *methodicide* or 'murder of method' is that it allows feminist theories to retain their *pluralism* or spirit of free interpretation which – theorists claim – is the characteristic strength of women's speech over men's. The disadvantage is that by remaining unstructured, feminist theories get marginalised or made unimportant by other, more organised schools of critical theory. The alternative to *methodicide* is *methodolatry* or worship of method. The constituency thus includes theorists whose preferences vary but can be grouped under either of these responses.

### 26.2.2 Its Thesis and Data

The thesis of this essay is one which Showalter formulates more discursively in the 1979 essay 'Toward a Feminist Poetics,' to which 5.1 alludes. Showalter argues that there are essentially *two* kinds of feminist theory. The *first* concerns itself with the *woman as reader* and may be called the *feminist critique*.

... like other kinds of critique is a historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history. It is also concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience. (Showalter, 128)

The *second* concerns itself with the *woman as writer* and may be called *gynocritics*. It deals with ... woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and of course, studies of particular writers and works, (ibid.)

Comparing the two modes of theory Showalter writes

The feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics; gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental with connections to other modes of new feminist research ....[We may] compare the feminist critique to the Old Testament, 'looking for the sins and errors of the past,' and gynocritics to the New Testament, seeking 'the grace of the imagination.' Both kinds are necessary...for only the Jeremiahs of the feminist critique can lead us out of the 'Egypt of female servitude' to 'the promised land of the feminist vision' (ibid.,129)

Let me suggest an example of these two kinds of writing. Suppose I write an essay 'Stereotypes of women in *Middlemarch*.' I might discuss Dorothea as a failed theorist, Rosamond as a dumb blonde and Mary Garth as a wise governess. I might go on to speak of them as being prisoners of both class and gender due to the constraints of Victorian society. The essay would be primarily a feminist critique that analysed cultural and aesthetic stereotypes in class-based terms borrowed probably from Marxist theory. Supposed instead my essay were to be titled 'The silencing of George Eliot in *Middlemarch*' I might look at the constraints placed on Eliot by patriarchy : her thwarted attempts to shape a sentence suitable to her needs and so on. I would probably need to

rely on work done in biological and linguistic criticism. This essay would be closer to *gynocritics* which examines the characteristic of a distinctively woman's practice of writing, and would perhaps be called *gynocentric* (or woman-centred) as opposed to *androcentric* (or male-centred).

The data Showalter uses to support her theory of gynocritics is based on four models. *Organic or biological* criticism believes that biological differentiation is fundamental to understanding how women see themselves in relation to society and hence to understanding how they represent themselves in writing. Its strength is its reliance on personal experience, that verges on the confessional. Its weakness is that it promotes exclusionism based on biological difference. *Linguistic* criticism examines possible differences in the ways women and men use language, explores reasons for these differences. Its strength is the powerful emotional appeal of the notion of a women's language. Its weakness is that it does not examine whether women and men have equality of opportunity and access to a common language. Thus inadvertently it may perpetuate repression instead of obtaining freedom by examining it. *Psychoanalytical feminist* criticism is a model of difference based on the relationship between gender and the creative process. It has a high degree of sensitivity when applied to specific texts, authors and groups of cultures. Its limitation as a theoretical model arises from its inability to explain social, economic or historical processes of change. Showalter therefore vests her faith in a model based on a theory of *women's culture*. Theories of biology, language and psyche inform such a theory of culture by suggesting a range of social contexts. Showalter borrows a diagrammatic representation from anthropology to explain the theory of women's culture. Women's culture and men's culture are represented by two intersecting circles with a large area of common experience and two slight crescent-shaped areas of experience. One of these is specific to women and the other is specific to men. Historically women have been the muted (or silenced) group and men the dominant group. Feminist theories (according to Showalter) need to articulate the area specific to women and put this at the centre of women's writing. The consequences promised are (a) a rewriting of cultural and literary history so as to include women, (b) a recreation of the canon and (c) an overhauling of literary classifications based on era and genre.

## 26.3 Its Contribution

### 26.3.1 Immediately

Showalter's earlier work had attracted criticism on account of its refusal to take African-American writing into account. Barbara Smith's 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' complains about Showalter's persistent ignoring of any non-white female writing. Smith begins by quoting Showalter's sole mention of such writing: 'Furthermore, there are other literary subcultures (African-American novelists, for example) whose history offers a precedent for feminist scholarship to use (Showalter, 172) and goes on to point out that such appropriation – even in the cause of feminist theory – is racist. "The idea of critics like Showalter *using* Black literature is chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism'. In contrast 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' tries to work toward cultural open-endedness in two ways. *First* she speaks of two cultures: women and men – as being muted and dominant respectively and thus deliberately avoids the concept of a subculture. In a sense *all* women – regardless of race and class comprised the marginalised culture and this common repression makes all women one, in Showalter's cultural model. *Secondly* Showalter emphasises that such a gynocentric cultural model must – if it is to work – be able to take into account all the forces – ethnic, academic or economic – so as to 'plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity'. This gain in cultural sensitivity is, I think, the most apparent impact of Showalter's essay. It makes gynocritics seem to offer a model that can take on board cultural variables and say, it can have a receptivity to feminist theories in the developing world. Nonetheless [see 6.2] it is a claim contested by Indian feminist theorists who feel that gynocritics is too obviously limited by its inheritance of Western cultural imperialism.

### 26.3.2 Subsequently

How well has gynocritics worn? Look at the following comment and see what you make of it ...there is a danger that a 'gynocriticism' that emphasises the pathology of women writers' interaction



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with a patriarchal canon (or even a maternal one .... becomes a poetics of suffering and victimisation. We also need to ask ourselves whether there are other more positive ways in which women writers may respond to an intimidating male tradition of misogynistic myths and monstrous women that threatens the creative fire in their heads? Is there hidden laughter as well as anger, a subversive spirit of feminine mischief able to parody or appropriate or reshape male stories, masculine modes and forms?

The *problem* with gynocriticism – as suggested here – is that it can see only one relationship between women’s writing and men’s writing : that which is adversarial or hostile. **Therefore** gynocriticism is restricted to offering a narrative of suffering in which women are seen always and only as victims. In the process gynocriticism loses the weapon it could have had to hijack the agenda of patriarchy : the weapon of laughter. Think back now to the one of Woolf’s essay, from which the element of fun – a woman speaking *about* and *to* women in a primarily male academy – is never lost. Does Woolf gain or lose, do you think, by putting across theory with a sense of fun? And as a corollary, do you think Showalter’s essay becomes more or less profound because it shuts out humour ?

## 26.4 Possible Application

Keeping these pros and cons in mind, please turn yet again to ‘An Introduction’ and give it another read. At the centre of the poem is an experience that – biologically and psychologically – is a part of the ‘wilderness.’ In other words it is part of that crescent-shaped area peculiar to the silenced culture of women. ‘When/ I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask? For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the /Bedroom, and closed the door He did not beat me/ But my sad woman-body felt so beaten./ The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank/ Pitifully.’ How much of this central experience can gynocriticism recover? The notion of woman as sufferer, perhaps can be restored to the articulate world. I should imagine though that a great deal of work on the interplay of ethnic, sexual and economic factors will need to be done, and I wonder how far gynocritics will offer a culturally-sensitive model. What do *you* think ?

### Self-Assessment

#### Choose the correct options

- Elain was born in  
(a) 1940                      (b) 1941                      (c) 1950                      (d) 1943
- Showalter hizzacks a stuffy patriarchal description by Leen Edel in  
(a) 1979                      (b) 1965                      (c) 1985                      (d) 1980
- The ‘Paris spring’ across Europe in favour of peace and liberation was echoed in  
(a) 1968                      (b) 1971                      (c) 1972                      (d) 1975
- Elain Showalter was  
(a) German theorist    (b) American theorist    (c) French theorist    (d) Russian theorist

## 26.5 Summary

- ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’ is written at a time when the American campus – a site for alternative or fringe thinking – is increasingly concerned (to all appearances ) with Women’s Studies. The essay highlights the need for feminist theories to work out a framework they can share. Showalter suggests gynocritics – theories which are centred on the experience of women as writers – as a common factor. She explores biological, linguistic and psychoanalytical models of difference in women’s writing and sets them aside in favour of a theory based on a model of women’s culture. Arguing that women constitute the muted culture and men the dominant culture, Showalter reminds feminist theorists of the need to keep all cultural phenomena – race, class, the academy and the market in mind – to produce a ‘thick’ or multi-layered analysis of women’s writing. This will enable feminist theorists to sensitively map the wilderness.

## 26.6 Key-Words

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1. The Old Testament : The Old Testament is associated in this essay with the restrictive practice of the feminist critique. The New Testament is associated in this essay with the more liberating practice of gynocritics. The excitement of the wilderness is due to the excitement of the challenges and 'difference' of women's writing. It is preferred in this essay to the serenity of the Promised Land which is that of the unchallenged, stable canon.  
The body of writings in the Bible about the cultural and spiritual development of Israel before the birth of Jesus. They were guided by a stern and punishing God, the Ten Commandments and the prophets.
2. The wilderness : The desert area in which the Israelites wandered when they were led by Moses from Egypt.
3. Egypt : where they had been slaves to the Egyptians, to...
4. The Promised Land : of Canaan which God gave them for their own country.
5. Jeremiah : A prophet who led Israel and warned them about the birth and ministry of Jesus and the development of the Church. It has a vision of a Loving, compassionate God who is there for all people not only the Israelites.

## Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (b)
2. (a)
3. (a)
4. (b)

## 26.7 Review Questions

1. Analyse the constituency of 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' and suggest possible ways in which it might have shaped the essay.
2. Evaluate gynocriticism against any one other critical model (discussed by Showalter in this essay) using 'An Introduction' to make the comparison.

## 26.8 Further Readings



Books

1. Showalter, Elaine (ed.) *The New Feminist Criticism; Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. 1984, repr. London : Virago, 1985.

## Unit 27: Elaine Showalter: Four Models of Feminism in “Feminist Criticism in Wilderness” – Biological and Linguistic Difference

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Examine four models of Feminism.
- Discuss Elaine approach to Feminism.

### Introduction

Elaine Showalter is an American literary critic, feminist, and writer on cultural and social issues. She is one of the founders of feminist literary criticism in United States academia, developing the concept and practice of gynocritics.

Best known in academic and popular cultural fields, she has written and edited numerous books and articles focused on a variety of subjects, from feminist literary criticism to fashion, sometimes sparking widespread controversy, especially with her work on illnesses. Showalter has been a television critic for People magazine and a commentator on BBC radio and television.

Showalter is a specialist in Victorian literature and the Fin-de-Siecle (turn of the 19th century). Her most innovative work in this field is in madness and hysteria in literature, specifically in women's writing and in the portrayal of female characters.

She is the Avalon Foundation Professor Emerita. Her academic honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1977-78) and a Rockefeller Humanities fellowship (1981-82). She is also the past-president of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

Showalter's best known works are *Toward a Feminist Poetics* (1979), *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture (1830-1980)* (1985), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (1990), *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997), and *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (2001). In 2007 Showalter was chair of the judges for the prestigious British literary award, the Man Booker International Prize.

## 27.1 Critical Importance

Showalter's book *Inventing Herself* (2001), a survey of feminist icons, was the culmination of a lengthy interest in communicating the importance of understanding feminist tradition. Showalter's early essays and editorial work in the late 1970s and the 1980s survey the history of the feminist tradition within the "wilderness" of literary theory and criticism. Working in the field of feminist literary theory and criticism, which was just emerging as a serious scholarly pursuit in universities in the 1970s, Showalter's writing reflects a conscious effort to convey the importance of mapping her discipline's past in order to both ground it in substantive theory, and amass a knowledge base that will be able to inform a path for future feminist academic pursuit.

In *Toward a Feminist Poetics* Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

1. Feminine: In the Feminine phase (1840-1880), "women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature" (New, 137).
2. Feminist: The Feminist phase (1880-1920) was characterized by women's writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.
3. Female: The Female phase (1920-) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, "women reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature" (New, 139).

Rejecting both imitation and protest, Showalter advocated approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current Female phase, rather than from perspectives that traditionally come from an androcentric perspective like psychoanalytic and biological theories, for example. Feminists in the past have worked within these traditions by revising and criticizing female representations, or lack thereof, in the male traditions (that is, in the Feminine and Feminist phases). In her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981), Showalter says, "A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space" (New, 260).

Showalter does not advocate replacing psychoanalysis, for example, with cultural anthropology; rather, she suggests that approaching women's writing from a cultural perspective is one among many valid perspectives that will uncover female traditions. However, cultural anthropology and social history are especially fruitful because they "can perhaps offer us a terminology and a diagram of women's cultural situation" (New, 266). Showalter's caveat is that feminist critics must use cultural analyses as ways to understand what women write, rather than to dictate what they ought to write (New, 266).

However isolationist-like Showalter's perspective may sound at first, she does not advocate a separation of the female tradition from the male tradition. She argues that women must work both inside and outside the male tradition simultaneously (New, 264). Showalter says the most constructive approach to future feminist theory and criticism lies in a focus on nurturing a new feminine cultural perspective within a feminist tradition that at the same time exists within the male tradition, but on which it is not dependent and to which it is not answerable.

## 27.2 Gynocritics

Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics' to describe literary criticism based in a feminine perspective. Probably the best description Showalter gives of gynocritics is in *Toward a Feminist Poetics*:

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based

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on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture.

This does not mean that the goal of gynocritics is to erase the differences between male and female writing; gynocritics is not "on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels" (New, 266). Rather gynocritics aims to understand the specificity of women's writing not as a product of sexism but as a fundamental aspect of female reality.

Showalter acknowledges the difficulty of "[d]efining the unique difference of women's writing" which she says is "a slippery and demanding task" in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (New, 249). She says that gynocritics may never succeed in understanding the special differences of women's writing, or realize a distinct female literary tradition. But, with grounding in theory and historical research, Showalter sees gynocriticism as a way to "learn something solid, enduring, and real about the relation of women to literary culture" (New, 249). She stresses heavily the need to free "ourselves from the lineal absolute of male literary history". That is going to be the point where gynocritics make a beginning.

### 27.3 Criticism and Controversy

#### **Feminist Theory and Criticism**

Duke-University based Toril Moi, in her 1985 book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, accused Showalter of having a limited, essentialist view of women. Moi particularly criticized Showalter's ideas regarding the Female phase, and its notions of a woman's singular autonomy and necessary search inward for a female identity. In a predominantly poststructuralist era that proposes that meaning is contextual and historical, and that identity is socially and linguistically constructed, Moi claimed that there is no fundamental female self.

According to Moi, the problem of equality in literary theory does not lie in the fact that the literary canon is fundamentally male and unrepresentative of female tradition, rather the problem lies in the fact that a canon exists at all. Moi argues that a feminine literary canon would be no less oppressive than the male canon because it would necessarily represent a particular socio demographic class of woman; it could not possibly represent all women because female tradition is drastically different depending on class, ethnicity, social values, sexuality, etc. A female consciousness cannot exist for the same reasons. Moi objects to what she sees as an essentialist position - that is, she objects to any determination of identity based on gender. Moi's criticism was influential as part of a larger debate between essentialist and postmodern feminist theorists at the time.

#### **Hysteria and "Modern" Illnesses**

Showalter's controversial take on illnesses such as dissociative identity disorder (formerly called multiple personality disorder), Gulf War syndrome and chronic fatigue syndrome in her book *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997) has angered some in the health profession and many who suffer from these illnesses. Writing in the *New York Times*, psychologist Carol Tavris commented that "In the absence of medical certainty, the belief that all such symptoms are psychological in origin is no improvement over the belief that none of them are." [2] Showalter (who has no formal medical training) admits to receiving hate mail, but has not been deterred from her position that these conditions are contemporary manifestations of hysteria. [1]

#### **Popular Culture**

Showalter also came up against criticism in the late 1990s for some of her writing on popular culture that appeared in magazines like *People* and *Vogue*. Deirdre English, in the American magazine *The Nation*, wrote:



As the post structuralist critique of identity politics took hold over the following decade and more, it became unfashionable, in ideas and in dress, it seemed, for the avant-garde of the female professoriate to identify with either men or women.

English quotes Showalter's controversial 1997 Vogue article:

"From Mary Wollstonecraft to Naomi Wolf, feminism has often taken a hard line on fashion, shopping, and the whole beauty Monty.... But for those of us sisters hiding Welcome to Your Facelift inside The Second Sex, a passion for fashion can sometimes seem a shameful secret life.... I think it's time I came out of the closet."

Showalter was reportedly severely criticized by her academic colleagues for her stance in favour of patriarchal symbols of consumer capitalism and traditional femininity. Showalter's rejoinder was: "We needn't fall into postmodern apocalyptic despair about the futility of political action or the impossibility of theoretical correctness as a pre-condition for action" (English).

### Academic Teaching

Teaching Literature (2006) was widely and positively reviewed, especially in the American journal Pedagogy, which gave it three review-essays and called it "the book we wish we had in our backpacks when we started teaching." It was also harshly criticized by John Rouse in his review of the book. Rouse lambasted Showalter for what he sees as her "banal" suggestions and mocks that she describes her revelation that literature should be taught as performance, as a "discovery." Rouse nevertheless gives her credit, albeit condescendingly, for attempting to make literature "more attractive to undergraduates." Ultimately Rouse criticizes Showalter's approach to teaching literature: "the work will be flayed, filleted, and displayed as another specimen of the genre."

## 27.4 Summaries of Major Works

Showalter's Ph.D. thesis is called *The Double Critical Standard: Criticism of Women Writers in England, 1845-1880* (1969) and was later turned into the book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1978), which contains a lengthy and much-discussed chapter on Virginia Woolf.

**The Female Malady:** *Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985) discusses hysteria, which was once known as the "female malady" and according to Showalter, is called depression today. Showalter demonstrates how cultural ideas about proper feminine behaviour have shaped the definition and treatment of female insanity from the Victorian era to the present.

**Sexual Anarchy:** *Gender at Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (1990) outlines a history of the sexes and the crises, themes, and problems associated with the battle for sexual supremacy and identity.

In the 1990s, Showalter began writing for popular magazines, bringing her work further into the public sphere than it ever had been during her academic career. Showalter was the television critic for *People* magazine in 1996. She explains her impetus to do popular cultural work: "I've always really loved popular culture, but it wasn't something serious intellectuals were supposed to be concerned about. ... I would like to be able to bring my background and my skills to subjects that do reach a wide audience" (Plett).

**In Hystories:** *Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997) Showalter argues that hysteria, a medical condition traditionally seen as feminine, has persisted for centuries and is now manifesting itself in cultural phenomena in the forms of socially and medically accepted maladies. Psychological and physical effects of unhappy lives become "hysterical epidemics" when popular media saturate the public with paranoid reports and findings, essentially legitimizing, as Showalter calls them, "imaginary illnesses" (*Hystories*, cover). Showalter says "Hysteria is part of everyday life. It not only survives in the 1990s, but it is more contagious than in the past. Newspapers, magazines, talk shows, self-help books, and of course the Internet ensure that ideas, once planted, manifest themselves internationally as symptoms" (Plett). This view has caused Showalter to be criticized by patient's rights groups and medical practitioners, who argue that Showalter, with no formal medical training, is not qualified to make this determination.

## Notes

**Inventing Herself:** *Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (2001) surveys feminist icons since the 18th century, situated mostly in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Showalter covers the contributions of predominately intellectuals like Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Camille Paglia. Noting popular media's importance to the perception of women and feminism today, Showalter also discusses the contributions of popular personalities like Oprah Winfrey and Princess Diana.

*Teaching Literature* (2003) is essentially a guide to teaching English literature to undergraduate students in university. Showalter covers approaches to teaching theory, preparing syllabi and talking about taboo subjects among many other practical topics. Showalter says that teaching should be taken as seriously and given as much intellectual consideration as scholarship.

**Faculty Towers:** *The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005) is a study of the Anglo-American academic novel from the 1950s to the present.

**A Jury of Her Peers:** *American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (2009) makes a claim for a literary tradition of American women writers.

### 27.5 Showalter's Feminist Critique and Gynocriticism

Reading Showalter's essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" for the second time was really very useful and enjoyable for me. It enabled me to understand the core ideas of this essay more comprehensively. Not only this essay, but also Showalter's preceding essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1979). I like Showalter, she is my favorite American feminist critic. I enjoy her writings about theory and pedagogy. Most of times I found her writings clear, persuasive, informative and creative. While I was rereading the essay, I started to recall many thoughts about Showalter's gynocriticism. I said what about developing these thoughts into a reading response, and I hope this will work.

First, let start with defining Showalter's gynocriticism: it's a term adapted by Showalter for the first time in her essay "Toward a Feminist poetics". This term stands for the study of female literary texts by female critics. It's the study of the themes, language, styles, historical backgrounds, and structures of literature by women. Gynocriticism has two important aims: the first, is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, the second, is to develop new models which depend on the study of the female experience, rather than to apply male models, texts and theories. According to Showalter, the departure point of gynocriticism is feminists' freedom from the impact of male literary history.

But before defining gynocriticism Showalter divides feminist criticism into two distinct types: feminist critique and gynocriticism. She defines feminist critique as this sort of literary criticism which is concerned with women as readers and consumers of male literature. The main aim of this criticism is to depict how women were presented in male-produced literature. From here, we can safely say that feminist critique and the Image of Women criticism are the same. But this sort of criticism does not satisfy Showalter's hopes and ambitions about feminist criticism, simply because she believes that feminist criticism should move towards the establishment of an especially female tradition of writing . Feminists should stop searching for how women were depicted in male-produced literature because by doing this feminists are just knowing how men want women to be, not how women want themselves to be. Showlater is calling for a female autonomy which depicts women's own experiences and feelings. After proving that women have a literature of their own, to recall Showalter's sentence, through the process of rediscovering lost or neglected texts written by women, it became a must for feminists to start constructing a female-oriented literary criticism. So that, and as a natural result, comes Showalter's call for applying the second type of feminist criticism which is gynocriticism. It's the criticism which is concerned with woman as a writer and producer of literary texts. Showalter calls for applying gynocriticism because she believes that it stands in contrast to the feminist critique's loyalty and celebration of male texts. She emphasizes gynocriticism as a more useful approach to feminist criticism than feminist critique.

Let us move to what some other feminist critics think about gynocriticism. Some of them consider practicing gynocriticism to be more influential not only because it concentrates on female-produced

literature, but also because it heirs them avoid the problem of tension between their interpretative approach and the question of aesthetics. When dealing with a male writer feminists face a problem of resolving the tension of the ethics of his literary text. In fact, this tension between the aesthetic and moral or political dimensions of texts has been a central problem to the practitioners of the school of Image of Women criticism. Let us take Josephine Donovan as an example. When discussing Faulkner's *Light in August*, Donovan states that she appreciates the formal elements of this text. She asserts that the work is really magnificent, but she can not bear the huge rank of misogyny and racism in this text. This made it impossible for her, as a feminist, to accept the ethics of this text. From Donovan's view we came to know that any literary work written by males which carries any sort of misogyny or racism should not be treated by feminists; simply because if they did this would be an undeclared approval of these themes which are against feminism.

But the existence of problems should not prevent us from declaring the importance of Images of Women criticism. Its major importance reveals itself when reading Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Mary Ellmann's *Thinking about Women*, among others. Those feminists tried seriously to deconstruct androcentrism, and made both women and men think of literature in different terms through establishing a feminist interpretation for the first time. This interpretation became the basis for feminist criticism.

I agree with Showalter that gynocriticism is more influential than feminist critique, but I do not agree that the second is less important than the first. Because the importance of both gynocriticism and feminist critique, or the Image of Woman critique, relates much to the stage where each activity should be used and applied. For example, the initial stage of feminist criticism needs a sort of deconstructing any kind of misogyny against women in literary work by men. Once feminists deconstructed it, they need to move on to a new stage, a stage which becomes a must especially after the rediscovery of many women writings.

Through reading Showalter's two complementary essays: "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1979), and "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), it's important to know that practicing gynocriticism, through celebrating women writings, does not mean to abandon men's forever, or to stop reading men's writings. We know, very well, how feminists fought to include women writings into the literary canon. But is the process of including enough? Or do feminists need to analyze these texts, exactly as they did with men's writings.

## **27.6 Biological and Linguistic Difference**

### **Pluralism and the Feminist Critique**

In a splendidly witty dialogue of 1975, Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson identified two poles of feminist literary criticism. The first of these modes, righteous, angry, and admonitory, they compared to the Old Testament, "looking for the sins and errors of the past." The second mode, disinterested and seeking "the grace of imagination," they compared to the New Testament. Both are necessary, they concluded, for only the Jeremiahs of ideology can lead us out of the "Egypt of female servitude" to the promised land of humanism. Matthew Arnold also thought that literary critics might perish in the wilderness before they reached the promised land of disinterestedness; Heilbrun and Stimpson were neo-Arnoldian as befitted members of the Columbia and Barnard faculties. But if, in 1981, feminist literary critics are still wandering in the wilderness, we are in good company; for, as Geoffrey Hartman tells us, all criticism is in the wilderness. Feminist critics may be startled to find ourselves in this band of theoretical pioneers, since in the American literary tradition the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain. Yet between feminist ideology and the liberal ideal of disinterestedness lies the wilderness of theory, which we too must make our home.

Women have no wilderness in them, they are provident instead content in the tight not cell of their hearts. To eat dusty bread.

– Louise Bogan, "Women"

Until very recently, feminist criticism has not had a theoretical basis; it has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm. In 1975, I was persuaded that no theoretical manifesto could adequately account for the varied methodologies and ideologies which called themselves feminist reading or writing. By the next year, Annette Kolodny had added her observation that feminist

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literary criticism appeared "more like a set of interchangeable strategies than any coherent school or shared goal orientation." Since then, the expressed goals have not been notably unified. Black critics protest the "massive silence" of feminist criticism about black and Third-World women writers and call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics. Marxist feminists wish to focus on class along with gender as a crucial determinant of literary production. Literary historians want to uncover a lost tradition. Critics trained in deconstructionist methodologies wish to "synthesize a literary criticism that is both textual and feminist." Freudian and Lacanian critics want to theorize about women's relationship to language and signification. An early obstacle to constructing a theoretical framework for feminist criticism was the unwillingness of many women to limit or bound an expressive and dynamic enterprise. The openness of feminist criticism appealed particularly to Americans who perceived the structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist debates of the 1970s as arid and falsely objective, the epitome of a pernicious masculine discourse from which many feminists wished to escape. Recalling in *A Room of One's Own* how she had been prohibited from entering the university library, the symbolic sanctuary of the male *logos*, Virginia Woolf wisely observed that while it is "unpleasant to be locked out ... it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in." Advocates of the antitheoretical position traced their descent from Woolf and from other feminist visionaries, such as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, and Marguerite Duras, who had satirized the sterile narcissism of male scholarship and celebrated women's fortunate exclusion from its patriarchal methodolatry. Thus for some, feminist criticism was an act of resistance to theory, a confrontation with existing canons and judgments, what Josephine Donovan calls "a mode of negation within a fundamental dialectic." As Judith Fetterley declared in her book, *The Resisting Reader*, feminist criticism has been characterized by "a resistance to codification and a refusal to have its parameters prematurely set." I have discussed elsewhere, with considerable sympathy, the suspicion of monolithic systems and the rejection of scientism in literary study that many feminist critics have voiced. While scientific criticism struggled to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism reasserted the authority of experience.

Yet it now appears that what looked like a theoretical impasse was actually an evolutionary phase. The ethics of awakening have been succeeded, at least in the universities, by a second stage characterized by anxiety about the isolation of feminist criticism from a critical community increasingly theoretical in its interests and indifferent to women's writing. The question of how feminist criticism should define itself with relation to the new critical theories and theorists has occasioned sharp debate in Europe and the United States. Nina Auerbach has noted the absence of dialogue and asks whether feminist criticism itself must accept responsibility:

Feminist critics seem particularly reluctant to define themselves to the uninitiated. There is a sense in which our sisterhood has become too powerful; as a school, our belief in ourself is so potent that we decline communication with the networks of power and respectability we say we want to change.

But rather than declining communication with these networks, feminist criticism has indeed spoken directly to them, in their own media: *PMLA*, *Diacritics*, *Glyph*, *Tel Quel*, *New Literary History*, and *Critical Inquiry*. For the feminist critic seeking clarification, the proliferation of communiqués may itself prove confusing.

There are two distinct modes of feminist criticism, and to conflate them (as most commentators do) is to remain permanently bemused by their theoretical potentialities. The first mode is ideological; it is concerned with the feminist as reader, and it offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-assign in semiotic systems. This is not all feminist reading can do; it can be a liberating intellectual act, as Adrienne Rich proposes:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh.

This invigorating encounter with literature, which I will call feminist reading or the feminist critique, is in essence a mode of interpretation, one of many which any complex text will



accommodate and permit. It is very difficult to propose theoretical coherence in an activity which by its nature is so eclectic and wide-ranging, although as a critical practice feminist reading has certainly been very influential. But in the free play of the interpretive field, the feminist critique can only compete with alternative readings, all of which have the built-in obsolescence of Buicks, cast away as newer readings take their place. As Kolodny, the most sophisticated theorist of feminist interpretation, has conceded:

All the feminist is asserting, then, is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significances from these same texts; and, at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it. In the process, she claims neither definitiveness nor structural completeness for her different readings and reading systems, but only their usefulness in recognizing the particular achievements of woman-as-author and their applicability in conscientiously decoding woman-as-sign.

Rather than being discouraged by these limited objectives, Kolodny found them the happy cause of the "playful pluralism" of feminist critical theory, a pluralism which she believes to be "the only critical stance consistent with the current status of the larger women's movement." Her feminist critic dances adroitly through the theoretical minefield.

Keenly aware of the political issues involved and presenting brilliant arguments, Kolodny nonetheless fails to convince me that feminist criticism must altogether abandon its hope "of establishing some basic conceptual model." If we see our critical job as interpretation and reinterpretation, we must be content with pluralism as our critical stance. But if we wish to ask questions about the process and the contexts of writing, if we genuinely wish to define ourselves to the uninitiated, we cannot rule out the prospect of theoretical consensus at this early stage.

All feminist criticism is in some sense revisionist, questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures, and indeed most contemporary American criticism claims to be revisionist too. The most exciting and comprehensive case for this "revisionary imperative" is made by Sandra Gilbert: at its most ambitious, she asserts, feminist criticism "wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority."<sup>1</sup> But in practice, the revisionary feminist critique is redressing a grievance and is built upon existing models. No one would deny that feminist criticism has affinities to other contemporary critical practices and methodologies and that the best work is also the most fully informed. Nonetheless, the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems. What I mean here by "male critical theory" is a concept of creativity, literary history, or literary interpretation based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal. So long as we look to androcentric models for our most basic principles – even if we revise them by adding the feminist frame of reference—we are learning nothing new. And when the process is so one-sided, when male critics boast of their ignorance of feminist criticism, it is disheartening to find feminist critics still anxious for approval from the "white fathers" who will not listen or reply. Some feminist critics have taken upon themselves a revisionism which becomes a kind of homage; they have made Lacan the ladies' man of Diacritics and have forced Pierre Macherey into those dark alleys of the psyche where Engels feared to tread. According to Christiane Makward, the problem is even more serious in France than in the United States: "If neofeminist thought in France seems to have ground to a halt," she writes, "it is because it has continued to feed on the discourse of the masters."

It is time for feminist criticism to decide whether between religion and revision we can claim any firm theoretical ground of our own. In calling for a feminist criticism that is genuinely women centered, independent, and intellectually coherent, I do not mean to endorse the separatist fantasies of radical feminist visionaries or to exclude from our critical practice a variety of intellectual tools. But we need to ask much more searchingly what we want to know and how we can find answers to the questions that come from our experience. I do not think that feminist criticism can find a usable past in the androcentric critical tradition. It has more to learn from women's studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar



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on the masters. It must find its own subject, its own system, its own theory, and its own voice. As Rich writes of Emily Dickinson, in her poem "I Am in Danger-Sir," we must choose to have the argument out at last on our own premises.

### Defining the Feminine: Gynocritics and the Woman's Text

*A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine.* — Virginia Woolf

*It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.*

— Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

In the past decade, I believe, this process of defining the feminine has started to take place. Feminist criticism has gradually shifted its center from revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women. The second mode of feminist criticism engendered by this process is the study of women as *writers*, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. No English term exists for such a specialized critical discourse, and so I have invented the term "gynocritics." Unlike the feminist critique, gynocritics offers many theoretical opportunities. To see women's writing as our primary subject forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of the theoretical problem before us. It is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference. How can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? What is *the difference* of women's writing?

Patricia Meyer Spacks, I think, was the first academic critic to notice this shift from an androcentric to a gynocentric feminist criticism. In *The Female Imagination* (1975), she pointed out that few feminist theorists had concerned themselves with women's writing. Simone de Beauvoir's treatment of women writers in *The Second Sex* "always suggests an a priori tendency to take them less seriously than their masculine counterparts"; Mary Ellmann, in *Thinking about Women*, characterized women's literary success as escape from the categories of womanhood; and, according to Spacks, Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, "has little interest in woman imaginative writers."<sup>3</sup> Spacks' wide-ranging study inaugurated a new period of feminist literary history and criticism which asked, again and again, how women's writing had been different, how womanhood itself shaped women's creative expression. In such books as Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), my own *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction* (1978), Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), and Margaret Homans' *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980), and in hundreds of essays and papers, women's writing asserted itself as the central project of feminist literary study.

This shift in emphasis has also taken place in European feminist criticism. To date, most commentary on French feminist critical discourse has stressed its fundamental dissimilarity from the empirical American orientation, its unfamiliar intellectual grounding in linguistics, Marxism, neo-Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Derridean deconstruction. Despite these differences, however, the new French feminisms have much in common with radical American feminist theories in terms of intellectual affiliations and rhetorical energies. The concept of *écriture féminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text, is a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism, although it describes a Utopian possibility rather than a literary practice. Helene Cixous, one of the leading advocates of *écriture féminine*, has admitted that, with only a few exceptions, "there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity," and Nancy Miller explains that *écriture féminine* "privileges a textuality of the avantgarde, a literary production of the late twentieth century, and it is therefore fundamentally a hope, if not a blueprint, for the future." Nonetheless, the concept of *écriture féminine* provides a way of talking about women's writing which reasserts the value of the feminine and identifies the theoretical project of feminist criticism as the analysis of difference. In recent years, the translations of important work by Julia Kristeva, Cixous, and Luce Irigaray and the excellent collection *New French Feminisms* have made French criticism much more accessible to American feminist scholars.

English feminist criticism, which incorporates French feminist and Marxist theory but is more traditionally oriented to textual interpretation, is also moving toward a focus on women's writing. The emphasis in each country falls somewhat differently: English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression. All, however, have become gynocentric. All are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority.

Defining the unique difference of women's writing, as Woolf and Cixous have warned, must present a slippery and demanding task. Is difference a matter of style? Genre? Experience? Or is it produced by the reading process, as some textual critics would maintain? Spacks calls the difference of women's writing a "delicate divergency," testifying to the subtle and elusive nature of the feminine practice of writing. Yet the delicate divergency of the woman's text challenges us to respond with equal delicacy and precision to the small but crucial deviations, the cumulative weightings of experience and exclusion, that have marked the history of women's writing. Before we can chart this history, we must uncover it, patiently and scrupulously; our theories must be firmly grounded in reading and research. But we have the opportunity, through gynocritics, to learn something solid, enduring, and real about the relation of women to literary culture.

Theories of women's writing presently make use of four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of the woman writer and the woman's text; each model also represents a school of gynocentric feminist criticism with its own favorite texts, styles, and methods. They overlap but are roughly sequential in that each incorporates the one before. I shall try now to sort out the various terminologies and assumptions of these four models of difference and evaluate their usefulness.

### Women's Writing and Woman's Body

Organic or biological criticism is the most extreme statement of gender difference, of a text indelibly marked by the body: anatomy is textuality. Biological criticism is also one of the most sibylline and perplexing theoretical formulations of feminist criticism. Simply to invoke anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past. Victorian physicians believed that women's physiological functions diverted about twenty percent of their creative energy from brain activity. Victorian anthropologists believed that the frontal lobes of the male brain were heavier and more developed than female lobes and thus that women were inferior in intelligence.

More body, hence more writing.

– Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

While feminist criticism rejects the attribution of literal biological inferiority, some theorists seem to have accepted the metaphorical implications of female biological difference in writing. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for example, Gilbert and Gubar structure their analysis of women's writing around metaphors of literary paternity. "In patriarchal western culture," they maintain, ".. the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis." Lacking phallic authority, they go on to suggest, women's writing is profoundly marked by the anxieties of this difference: "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?"

To this rhetorical question Gilbert and Gubar offer no reply; but it is a serious question of much feminist theoretical discourse. Those critics who, like myself, would protest the fundamental analogy might reply that women generate texts from the brain or that the word-processor of the near future, with its compactly coded microchips, its inputs and outputs, is a metaphorical womb. The metaphor of literary paternity, as Auerbach has pointed out in her review of *The Madwoman*, ignores "an equally timeless and, for me, even more oppressive metaphorical equation between literary creativity and childbirth." Certainly metaphors of literary *maternity* predominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the process of literary creation is analogically much more similar to gestation, labor, and delivery than it is to insemination. Describing Thackeray's plan for

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*Henry Esmond*, for example, Douglas Jerrold jovially remarked, "You have heard, I suppose, that Thackeray is big with twenty parts, and unless he is wrong in his time, expects the first installment at Christmas." (If to write is metaphorically to give birth, from what organ can males generate texts?)

Some radical feminist critics, primarily in France but also in the United States, insist that we must read these metaphors as more than playful; that we must seriously rethink and redefine biological differentiation and its relation to women's unity. They argue that "women's writing proceeds from the body, that our sexual differentiation is also our source." In *Of Woman Born*, Rich explains her belief that

female biology . . . has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life, we require not only *control* of our bodies... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence.

Feminist criticism written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery. Alicia Ostriker, for example, argues that contemporary American women poets use a franker, more pervasive anatomical imagery than their male counterparts and that this insistent body language refuses the spurious transcendence that comes at the price of denying the flesh. In a fascinating essay on Whitman and Dickinson, Terence Diggory shows that physical nakedness, so potent a poetic symbol of authenticity for Whitman and other male poets, had very different connotations for Dickinson and her successors, who associated nakedness with the objectified or sexually exploited female nude and who chose instead protective images of the armored self.

Feminist criticism which itself tries to be biological, to write from the critic's body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form. Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "Washing Blood," the introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Studies* on the subject of motherhood, proceeds, in short lyrical paragraphs, to describe her own experience in adopting a child, to recount her dreams and nightmares, and to meditate upon the "healing unification of body and mind based not only on the lived experiences of motherhood as a social institution ... but also on a biological power speaking through us." Such criticism makes itself defiantly vulnerable, virtually bares its throat to the knife, since our professional taboos against self-revelation are so strong. When it succeeds, however, it achieves the power and the dignity of art. Its existence is an implicit rebuke to women critics who continue to write, according to Rich, "from somewhere outside their female bodies." In comparison to this flowing confessional criticism, the tight-lipped Olympian intelligence of such texts as Elizabeth Hardwick's *Seduction and Betrayal* or Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* can seem arid and strained.

Yet in its obsessions with the "corporeal ground of our intelligence," feminist biocriticism can also become cruelly prescriptive. There is a sense in which the exhibition of bloody wounds becomes an initiation ritual quite separate and disconnected from critical insight. And as the editors of the journal *Questions feministes* point out, "it is ... dangerous to place the body at the center of a search for female identity .... The themes of otherness and of the Body merge together, because the most visible difference between men and women, and the only one we know for sure to be permanent . . . is indeed the difference in body. This difference has been used as a pretext to 'justify' full power of one sex over the other" (trans. Yvonne Rochette-Ozzello, NFF). The study of biological imagery in women's writing is useful and important as long as we understand that factors other than anatomy are involved in it. Ideas about the body are fundamental to understanding how women conceptualize their situation in society; but there can be no expression of the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social, and literary structures. The difference of woman's literary practice, therefore, must be sought (in Miller's words) in "the body of her writing and not the writing of her body."

## Women's Writing and Women's Language

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The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated.

– Monique Wittig, *Les Guerilleres*

Linguistic and textual theories of women's writing ask whether men and women use language differently; whether sex differences in language use can be theorized in terms of biology, socialization, or culture; whether women can create new languages of their own; and whether speaking, reading, and writing are all gender marked. American, French, and British feminist critics have all drawn attention to the philosophical, linguistic, and practical problems of women's use of language, and the debate over language is one of the most exciting areas in gynocritics. Poets and writers have led the attack on what Rich calls "the oppressor's language," a language sometimes criticized as sexist, sometimes as abstract. But the problem goes well beyond reformist efforts to purge language of its sexist aspects. As Nelly Furman explains, "It is through the medium of language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity, which in turn allow us to comprehend the world around us. Male-centered categorizations predominate in American English and subtly shape our understanding and perception of reality; this is why attention is increasingly directed to the inherently oppressive aspects for women of a male-constructed language system." According to Carolyn Burke, the language system is at the center of French feminist theory:

The central issue in much recent women's writing in France is to find and use an appropriate female language. Language is the place to begin: a prise de conscience must be followed by a prise de la parole.... In this view, the very forms of the dominant mode of discourse show the mark of the dominant masculine ideology. Hence, when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable.

Many French feminists advocate a revolutionary linguism, an oral break from the dictatorship of patriarchal speech. Annie Leclerc, in *Parole de femme*, calls on women "to invent a language that is not oppressive, a language that does not leave speechless but that loosens the tongue" (trans. Courtivron, NFF, p. 179). Chantal Chawaf, in an essay on "La chair linguistique," connects biofeminism and linguism in the view that women's language and a genuinely feminine practice of writing will articulate the body:

In order to reconnect the book with the body and with pleasure, we must disintellectualize writing.... And this language, as it develops, will not degenerate and dry up, will not go back to the fleshless academicism, the stereotypical and servile discourses that we reject. . . . Feminine language must, by its very nature, work on life passionately, scientifically, poetically, politically in order to make it invulnerable.

But scholars who want a women's language that is intellectual and theoretical, that works inside the academy, are faced with what seems like an impossible paradox, as Xaviere Gauthier has lamented: "As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write as *men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt" (trans. Marilyn A. August, NFF, pp. 162-63). What we need, Mary Jacobus has proposed, is a women's writing that works within "male" discourse but works "ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written," and according to Shoshana Felman, "the challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to 'reinvent' language,... to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning."

Beyond rhetoric, what can linguistic, historical, and anthropological research tell us about the prospects for a women's language? First of all, the concept of a women's language is not original

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with feminist criticism; it is very ancient and appears frequently in folklore and myth. In such myths, the essence of women's language is its secrecy; what is really being described is the male fantasy of the enigmatic nature of the feminine. Herodotus, for example, reported that the Amazons were able linguists who easily mastered the languages of their male antagonists, although men could never learn the women's tongue. In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves romantically argues that a women's language existed in a matriarchal stage of prehistory; after a great battle of the sexes, the matriarchy was overthrown and the women's language went underground, to survive in the mysterious cults of Eleusis and Corinth and the witch covens of Western Europe. Travelers and missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought back accounts of "women's languages" among American Indians, Africans, and Asians (the differences in linguistic structure they reported were usually superficial). There is some ethnographic evidence that in certain cultures women have evolved a private form of communication out of their need to resist the silence imposed upon them in public life. In ecstatic religions, for example, women, more frequently than men, speak in tongues, a phenomenon attributed by anthropologists to their relative inarticulateness in formal religious discourse. But such ritualized and unintelligible female "languages" are scarcely cause for rejoicing; indeed, it was because witches were suspected of esoteric knowledge and possessed speech that they were burned.

From a political perspective, there are interesting parallels between the feminist problem of a women's language and the recurring "language issue" in the general history of decolonization. After a revolution, a new state must decide which language to make official: the language that is "psychologically immediate," that allows "the kind of force that speaking one's mother tongue permits"; or the language that "is an avenue to the wider community of modern culture," a community to whose movements of thought only "foreign" languages can give access. The language issue in feminist criticism has emerged, in a sense, after our revolution, and it reveals the tensions in the women's movement between those who would stay outside the academic establishments and the institutions of criticism and those who would enter and even conquer them.

The advocacy of a women's language is thus a political gesture that also carries tremendous emotional force. But despite its unifying appeal, the concept of a women's language is riddled with difficulties. Unlike Welsh, Breton, Swahili, or Amharic, that is, languages of minority or colonized groups, there is no mother tongue, no genderlect spoken by the female population in a society, which differs significantly from the dominant language. English and American linguists agree that "there is absolutely no evidence that would suggest the sexes are pre-programmed to develop structurally different linguistic systems." Furthermore, the many specific differences in male and female speech, intonation, and language use that have been identified cannot be explained in terms of "two separate sex-specific languages" but need to be considered instead in terms of styles, strategies, and contexts of linguistic performance. Efforts at quantitative analysis of language in texts by men or women, such as Mary Hiatt's computerized study of contemporary fiction, *The Way Women Write* (1977), can easily be attacked for treating words apart from their meanings and purposes. At a higher level, analyses which look for "feminine style" in the repetition of stylistic devices, image patterns, and syntax in women's writing tend to confuse innate forms with the overdetermined results of literary choice. Language and style are never raw and instinctual but are always the products of innumerable factors, of genre, tradition, memory, and context.

The appropriate task for feminist criticism, I believe, is to concentrate on women's access to language, on the available lexical range from which words can be selected, on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution. In a series of drafts for a lecture on women's writing (drafts which she discarded or suppressed), Woolf protested against the censorship which cut off female access to language. Comparing herself to Joyce, Woolf noted the differences between their verbal territories: "Now men are shocked if a woman says what she feels (as Joyce does). Yet literature which is always pulling down blinds is not literature. All that we have ought to be expressed-mind and body-a process of incredible difficulty and danger."



"All that we have ought to be expressed – mind and body." Rather than wishing to limit women's linguistic range, we must fight to open and extend it. The holes in discourse, the blanks and gaps and silences, are not the spaces where female consciousness reveals itself but the blinds of a "prison-house of language." Women's literature is still haunted by the ghosts of repressed language, and until we have exorcised those ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference.

### Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) 'Toward a Feminist Poetics was published' in ..... .  
 (a) 1979 (b) 1980  
 (c) 1975 (d) 1978
- (ii) The term 'Gynocritics' coined by ..... .  
 (a) Woff (b) Showalter  
 (c) Perkins (d) none of these
- (iii) Feminist criticism in the Wilderness was published in ..... .  
 (a) 1981 (b) 1979  
 (c) 1980 (d) 1982

### 27.7 Summary

- Until very recently, feminist criticism has not had a theoretical basis; it has been an empirical orphan in the theoretical storm. In 1975, I was persuaded that no theoretical manifesto could adequately account for the varied methodologies and ideologies which called themselves feminist reading or writing. By the next year, Annette Kolodny had added her observation that feminist literary criticism appeared "more like a set of interchangeable strategies than any coherent school or shared goal orientation."
- There are two distinct modes of feminist criticism, and to conflate them (as most commentators do) is to remain permanently bemused by their theoretical potentialities. The first mode is ideological; it is concerned with the feminist as reader, and it offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-assign in semiotic systems.
- It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.
- Feminist criticism has gradually sifted its center from revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women. Showalter starts her essay with the poem of Louise Bogan, "Women" which opens with the lines:
 

"Women have no wilderness in them,  
 They are provident instead,  
 Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts  
 To eat dusty bread."
- With the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1920) a step in the direction of inspiring women to become writers was taken. This way is called Feminist Bible that upholds women as creative artist. In the very first paragraph of the essay Woolf emphatically remarks:
 

" – a woman must have money and  
 a room of her own if she is to write fiction."
- Woolf thinks "A woman's writing is always Feminine; it cannot help being Feminine; at its best it is most Feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by Feminine."

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- Elan Showalter, in her essay *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* (1985) defines and explores the development of women centered criticism which chiefly evaluated the women's writing as expression of women's experience. She says that "If in 1981, Feminist literary critics are still wandering in the wilderness, we are in good company; for, as Geoffrey Hartman tells us, all criticism is in the wilderness" but quoting Geoffrey she says all criticism is in wilderness today. She says, in *Feminine Criticism* had been no theoretical basis and it has been "an empirical orphan in the theoretical models that explore the difference between the androcentric and gynocentric criticism. These models are biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. The cultural model provides a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women's writing than theories based in biology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis..."
- There are two distinct modes of Feminist Criticism, and to conflate them (as most commentators do) is to remain permanently bemused by their theoretical potentialities. The first mode is ideological; it is concerned with the feminist as reader, and it offers Feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems. This is not all Feminist reading can do; it can be a liberating intellectual act, as Adrienne Rich proposes: A radical critique of literature, Feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name and therefore live-afresh.
- The second mode of Feminist Criticism engendered by this process is the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. English Feminist Criticism, which incorporates French Feminist and Marxist theory but is more traditionally oriented to textual interpretation, is also moving toward a focus on women's writing. Third mode is Organic or biological Criticism is the most extreme statement of gender difference, of a text indelibly marked by the body: anatomy is textually. Biological criticism is also one of the most sibylling and perplexing theoretical formulations of Feminist Criticism. Simply to invoke anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past. Some radical Feminist Critics, primarily in France but also in the United States, insist that we must read these metaphors as more than playful, that we must seriously rethink and redefine biological differentiation and its relation to women's unity. They argue that "women's writing proceeds from the body, that our sexual differentiation is also our source." The difference of woman's literary practice, therefore, must be sought (in Miller's words) in "the body of her writing and not the writing of her body."
- Last mode is Linguistic and textual theories of women's writing ask whether men and women use language differently; whether sex differences in language use can be theorized in terms of biology, socialization, or culture; whether women can create new languages of their own; and whether speaking, reading, and writing are all gender marked. The question of how Feminist Criticism should define itself with relation to the new critical theories and theorists has occasioned sharp debate in Europe and the United States. Nina Auerbach has notes the absence of dialogue and asks whether Feminist Criticism itself must accept responsibility. Feminist Critics seem particularly reluctant to define themselves to the uninitiated. There is a sense in which our sisterhood has become too powerful; as a school, our belief in ourself is so potent that we decline communication with the networks of power and respectability we say we want to change.
- All Feminist Criticism is in some sense revisionist, questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures, and indeed most contemporary American criticism claims to be revisionist too. The most exciting and comprehensive case for this "revisionary imperative" is made by

Sandra Gilbert: at its most ambitious, she asserts, Feminist Criticism:

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"wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexually, genre and gender, psychosexual identify and cultural authority."

- What Showalter mean here by "male critical theory" is a concept of creativity, literary history, or literary interpretation based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal.
- Perhaps more than any other mode of criticism, Feminist theory has cut across and drawn on multiple and contradictory traditions which by presenting what is arguably one of the most fundamental challenges to previous critical orthodoxies in its revolution of subjectively and the category of experience. Like Marxism, Feminism is rooted in the political discourses of modernity. Not only Marxism, but also psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and post structuralist views, especially deconstruction of Jacques Derrida are considered crucial in Feminism. Feminist Criticism as a self aware and concerted approach to literature was not inaugurated until late in the 1900's. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the Rights of women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's, *the subjection of women* (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *women in Nineteenth century* are such texts, which are indubitably the landmark in the history of Feminist movement. But what is most important to note that Virginia Woolf was an outstanding precursson of Feminist Criticism. In her fictions and essays, most notably in *A Room of one's own*, she attack the patriarchal bias which prohibited women's creative possibility, A seminal text is indeed, Simone de Beauvoir. *The second sex*, which identifies women as cultural construct and reveals the fact that women are regarded as merely negative object or 'other', while men are defined as dominating subject. Similarly, Mary Ellaman's *Thinking doubt women-with* which Feminist Criticism began in America shows the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by women. Another important text which attacks the sexual bias in Freud's psycho analytical theory is Kate Millet's *sexual politics*.
- Although early second time Feminist Criticism drew extensively on de Beauviars works and on Kate Millet's "sexual politics" and concentrated its analysis on the images of women represented in and constructed through cultural forms such as literature, it has been viewed by later Feminist as often failing to offer an adequate analysis of the relationship between ideology and representation. But in spite of the difference in their pointsof view and procedures some assumptions and concerts are quite basic in this critical mode, western civilization is patriarchal. Just as logocentricism emphasis the extent to which metaphysical assumption about the superiority of speech over writing are built into language itself, phantasmagorical implies that masculine biases are profoundly related to the structures of meta physics. Even the patriarchal ideology is dominant in those writings which we consider great literature. For example, Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Captain Ahab - some well known male protagonists in some highly regarded literary works - embody masculine traits and ways of feeling and pursue masculine interests in masculine fields of action. As Simone de Beauvoir remarked, 'one is not born but rather becomes, a woman....'. While male is identified as active, dominative and rational Feminine is identified as passive, submissive and emotional. If Kate Millet attack D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer etc., by analyzing some selected passages of their works for regarding women as submissive sexual objects, most of Feminists praise Chaucer, Shakespeare and G.B. Shaw who rise above sexual prejudice.
- A great impetus is given to their critical approach when Elaine Showalter proposes gynocriticism which is more self contained and experimental and which is concerned with developing and specifically female frame work for dealing with works written by men, and with Feminine subject matters in literature written by woman and also with an attempt to specify the traits of a woman's language. Elaine showalter, however, led much emphasis on woman as a writer rather than woman as a reader. Elaine showalter's *A Literature of their own: British women Novelist from Brontel to lessing*, Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female imagination* Ellen Moers's *Literary women*, Sandra Gillert and Susan Gular's *The Madwomen in the Attic* are some notable works in their made. To evade the dilemma, namely women's

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language, Helene Cixous posits *écriture Feminine* (Feminine writing) and Julia Kristeva posits a Chora, or pre-linguistic signifying system that she labels 'semiotics'.

- Thus, Feminist literary criticism was influenced by multiple literary theories and criticism and congregate them into an organic whole so as to expose objective reality. As Elaine Showalter has observed, "English Feminist Criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression, French Feminist Criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American Feminist Criticism, essentially textual, stresses expressions".

### 27.8 Key-Words

1. Essentialism : Refers to ways of conceiving people, cultures, etc. as having certain innate, natural or universal characteristics. Essentialism is strongly contested in most contemporary literary theory. The following three statements are all examples of essentialist thinking:
  - (i) 'I have a personality and individuality which is completely unaffected by anything out there in the "real" world, such as language, economics, education, nationality, etc.';
  - (ii) 'Women are more intelligent, caring and sensitive than men';
  - (iii) 'At bottom, you are either white or black, and that's all there is to it'.

### 27.9 Review Questions

1. Discuss the critical importance of Feminist Criticism in wildernesses.
2. What do you mean by Gynocritics?
3. Explain the major works of Showalter.
4. British examine Feminist Criticism in wildernesses.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (b)                      (iii) (a)

### 27.10 Further Readings



Books

1. Hutcheon, Linda A *poetics of postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, London: Longman, 1972.
4. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh (eds.) *A Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, London: Arnold, 1999.
5. Sethuraman, V.S. and Ramaswamy (eds.) *The English Critical Tradition, Volume II*, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1977.
6. Seturaman, V.S. (ed.) *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008.

## Unit 28: Elaine Showalter: Four Models of Feminism in "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness" – Psychological and Cultural Difference

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Feminist Criticism in Wildersses.
- Discuss Psychological and Cultural Difference.

### Introduction

One of America's foremost academic literary scholars, Showalter is renowned for her pioneering feminist studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century female authors and her provocative cultural analysis of women's oppression in the history of psychiatry. In her influential book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), Showalter advanced a new form of feminist literary theory under the term "gynocriticism," offering an alternative framework for the interpretation of women's literary history. Likewise, in works such as *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985) and *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), Showalter forged the branch of feminist criticism known as "history," an attempt to reinterpret and redefine the pejorative notion of women's hysteria as embodied in literary and social history. Showalter's contributions to feminist criticism and women's studies have helped influence the canon of British and American literature, bringing new visibility and legitimacy to often forgotten or under-appreciated female authors.

Showalter was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1941 to parents Paul Cottler and Violet Rottenberg Cottler. Though he never finished grammar school, Showalter's immigrant father was a successful wool merchant. Showalter's mother completed high school but remained at home in the role of housewife. Showalter chose to attend Bryn Mawr College against the wishes of her parents who both disapproved of their daughter's intellectual leanings and educational ambitions.

Showalter has been widely appreciated by critics for her prodigious knowledge, insightful analysis, and accessible prose. Most feminist literary scholars have lauded her achievement in helping to legitimize and further develop feminist critique, particularly by reevaluating the social and historical context within which women's writing is studied. However, some critics have contended that Showalter's reach often exceeds her grasp, faulting her for raising provocative questions and presenting a wealth of material without analyzing it, or trying unsuccessfully to force-fit her usually expansive subject matter into a rigid critical context. Others have criticized Showalter for omitting or glossing over women writers who do not fit neatly into her thesis or analytical construct. In addition, some reviewers have objected to Showalter's literary biases, especially in regards to



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the Victorian era, and her dubious psychoanalytic assumptions. Showalter's works of cultural history, particularly *The Female Malady* and *Sexual Anarchy*, have received mixed reviews, but have been generally praised for their broad, interdisciplinary approach to literary, cultural, and social trends. Showalter's feminist history of psychiatry in *The Female Malady* has been commended for raising disturbing and important questions about the politics of interpretation and the power of gender as a determining factor in psychiatric treatment. Her focus on the psychiatric patient—rather than the history of the psychiatric profession—has also been viewed as a valuable contribution to the subject. However, some reviewers have faulted Showalter for her selective use of data and statistics, and her imprecise use of key terms, such as "hysteria." In later works such as *Hystories* and *Inventing Herself*, critics have hailed Showalter's impressive synthesis of evidence, though some have found her arguments less substantial and convincing than in previous works. Despite such shortcomings, Showalter has been highly regarded for calling attention to complex issues surrounding gender and sexual politics. Many of her works, most notably *A Literature of Their Own* and *The Female Malady*, have endured as staples of feminist literary criticism in university curricula.

### **28.1 Women's Writing and Woman's Psyche**

Psychoanalytically oriented feminist criticism locates the difference of women's writing in the author's psyche and in the relation of gender to the creative process. It incorporates the biological and linguistic models of gender difference in a theory of the female psyche or self, shaped by the body, by the development of language, and by sex-role socialization. Here too there are many difficulties to overcome; the Freudian model requires constant revision to make it gynocentric. In one grotesque early example of Freudian reductivism, Theodor Reik suggested that women have fewer writing blocks than men because their bodies are constructed to facilitate release: "Writing, as Freud told us at the end of his life, is connected with urinating, which physiologically is easier for a woman—they have a wider bladder." Generally, however, psychoanalytic criticism has focused not on the capacious bladder (could this be the organ from which females generate texts?) but on the absent phallus. Penis envy, the castration complex, and the Oedipal phase have become the Freudian coordinates defining women's relationship to language, fantasy, and culture. Currently the French psychoanalytic school dominated by Lacan has extended castration into a total metaphor for female literary and linguistic disadvantage. Lacan theorizes that the acquisition of language and the entry into its symbolic order occurs at the Oedipal phase in which the child accepts his or her gender identity. This stage requires an acceptance of the phallus as a privileged signification and a consequent female displacement, as Cora Kaplan has explained:

The phallus as a signifier has a central, crucial position in language, for if language embodies the patriarchal law of the culture, its basic meanings refer to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are acquired.... Thus the little girl's access to the Symbolic, i.e., to language and its laws, is always negative and/or mediated by intro-subjective relation to a third term, for it is characterized by an identification with lack.

In psychoanalytic terms, "lack" has traditionally been associated with the feminine, although Lac(k)anian critics can now make their statements linguistically. Many feminists believe that psychoanalysis could become a powerful tool for literary criticism, and recently there has been a renewed interest in Freudian theory. But feminist criticism based in Freudian or post-Freudian psychoanalysis must continually struggle with the problem of feminine disadvantage and lack. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar carry out a feminist revision of Harold Bloom's Oedipal model of literary history as a conflict between fathers and sons and accept the essential psychoanalytic definition of the woman artist as displaced, disinherited, and excluded. In their view, the nature and "difference" of women's writing lies in its troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity; the woman writer experiences her own gender as "a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy." The nineteenth-century woman writer inscribed her own sickness, her madness, her anorexia, her agoraphobia, and her paralysis in her texts; and although Gilbert and Gubar are dealing specifically with the nineteenth century, the range of their allusion and quotation suggests a more general thesis:

Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention—all these phenomena of "inferiorization" mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic selfdefinition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart.

In "Emphasis Added," Miller takes another approach to the problem of negativity in psychoanalytic criticism. Her strategy is to expand Freud's view of female creativity and to show how criticism of women's texts has frequently been unfair because it has been based in Freudian expectations. In his essay "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming" (1908), Freud maintained that the unsatisfied dreams and desires of women are chiefly erotic; these are the desires that shape the plots of women's fiction. In contrast, the dominant fantasies behind men's plots are egoistic and ambitious as well as erotic. Miller shows how women's plots have been granted or denied credibility in terms of their conformity to this phallogocentric model and that a gynocentric reading reveals a repressed egoistic/ambitious fantasy in women's writing as well as in men's. Women's novels which are centrally concerned with fantasies of romantic love belong to the category disdained by George Eliot and other serious women writers as "silly novels"; the smaller number of women's novels which inscribe a fantasy of power imagine a world for women outside of love, a world, however, made impossible by social boundaries.

There has also been some interesting feminist literary criticism based on alternatives to Freudian psychoanalytic theory: Annis Pratt's Jungian history of female archetypes, Barbara Rigney's Laingian study of the divided self in women's fiction, and Ann Douglas' Eriksonian analysis of inner space in nineteenth-century women's writing. And for the past few years, critics have been thinking about the possibilities of a new feminist psychoanalysis that does not revise Freud but instead emphasizes the development and construction of gender identities.

The most dramatic and promising new work in feminist psychoanalysis looks at the pre-Oedipal phase and at the process of psychosexual differentiation. Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) has had an enormous influence on women's studies. Chodorow revises traditional psychoanalytic concepts of differentiation, the process by which the child comes to perceive the self as separate and to develop ego and body boundaries. Since differentiation takes place in relation to the mother (the primary caretaker), attitudes toward the mother "emerge in the earliest differentiation of the self"; "the mother, who is a woman, becomes and remains for children of both genders the other, or object." The child develops core gender identity concomitantly with differentiation, but the process is not the same for boys and girls. A boy must learn his gender identity negatively as being not-female, and this difference requires continual reinforcement. In contrast, a girl's core gender identity is positive and built upon sameness, continuity, and identification with the mother. Women's difficulties with feminine identity come after the Oedipal phase, in which male power and cultural hegemony give sex differences a transformed value. Chodorow's work suggests that shared parenting, the involvement of men as primary caretakers of children, will have a profound effect on our sense of sex difference, gender identity, and sexual preference.

But what is the significance of feminist psychoanalysis for literary criticism? One thematic carry-over has been a critical interest in the mother-daughter configuration as a source of female creativity. Elizabeth Abel's bold investigation of female friendship in contemporary women's novels uses Chodorow's theory to show how not only the relationships of women characters but also the relationship of women writers to each other are determined by the psychodynamics of female bonding. Abel too confronts Bloom's paradigm of literary history, but unlike Gilbert and Gubar she sees a "triadic female pattern" in which the Oedipal relation to the male tradition is balanced by the woman writer's pre-Oedipal relation to the female tradition. "As the dynamics of female friendship differ from those of male," Abel concludes, "the dynamics of female literary influence also diverge and deserve a theory of influence attuned to female psychology and to women's dual position in literary history."

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Like Gilbert, Gubar, and Miller, Abel brings together women's texts from a variety of national literatures, choosing to emphasize "the constancy of certain emotional dynamics depicted in diverse cultural situations." Yet the privileging of gender implies not only the constancy but also the immutability of these dynamics. Although psychoanalytically based models of feminist criticism can now offer us remarkable and persuasive readings of individual texts and can highlight extraordinary similarities between women writing in a variety of cultural circumstances, they cannot explain historical change, ethnic difference, or the shaping force of generic and economic factors. To consider these issues, we must go beyond psychoanalysis to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women's writing which places it in the maximum context of culture.

## 28.2 Women's Writing and Women's Culture

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I consider women's literature as a specific category, not because of biology, but because it is, in a sense, the literature of the colonized.

—Christiane Rochefort, "The Privilege of Consciousness"

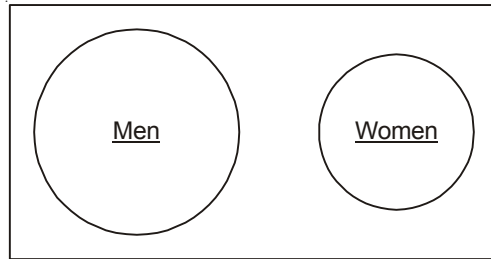
A theory based on a model of women's culture can provide, I believe, a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women's writing than theories based in biology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis. Indeed, a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman's body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. The female psyche can be studied as the product or construction of cultural forces. Language, too, comes back into the picture, as we consider the social dimensions and determinants of language use, the shaping of linguistic behavior by cultural ideals. A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space. It is in the emphasis on the binding force of women's culture that this approach differs from Marxist theories of cultural hegemony.

Hypotheses of women's culture have been developed over the last decade primarily by anthropologists, sociologists, and social historians in order to get away from masculine systems, hierarchies, and values and to get at the primary and self-defined nature of female cultural experience. In the field of women's history, the concept of women's culture is still controversial, although there is agreement on its significance as a theoretical formulation. Gerda Lerner explains the importance of examining women's experience in its own terms:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women. To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on a woman-centered inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. This is the primary task of women's history. The central question it raises is: What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define?

In defining female culture, historians distinguish between the roles, activities, tastes, and behaviors prescribed and considered appropriate for women and those activities, behaviors, and functions

actually generated out of women's lives. In the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term "woman's sphere" expressed the Victorian and Jacksonian vision of separate roles for men and women, with little or no overlap and with women subordinate. If we were to diagram it, the Victorian model would look like this:



Woman's sphere was defined and maintained by men, but women frequently internalized its precepts in the American "cult of true womanhood" and the English "feminine ideal." Women's culture, however, redefines women's "activities and goals from a woman-centered point of view.... The term implies an assertion of equality and an awareness of sisterhood, the communality of women." Women's culture refers to "the broad-based communality of values, institutions, relationships, and methods of communication" unifying nineteenth-century female experience, a culture nonetheless with significant variants by class and ethnic group (MFP, pp. 52, 54).

Some feminist historians have accepted the model of separate spheres and have seen the movement from woman's sphere to women's culture to women's-rights activism as the consecutive stages of an evolutionary political process. Others see a more complex and perpetual negotiation taking place between women's culture and the general culture. As Lerner has argued:

It is important to understand that "woman's culture" is not and should not be seen as a subculture. It is hardly possible for the majority to live in a subculture.... Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of woman's function, even its "superiority") and redefine it. Thus, women live a duality-as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture. [MFP, p. 52]

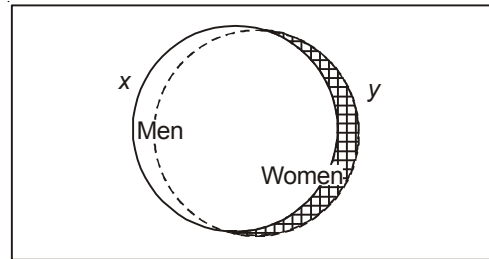
Lerner's views are similar to those of some cultural anthropologists. A particularly stimulating analysis of female culture has been carried out by two Oxford anthropologists, Shirley and Edwin Ardener. The Ardeners have tried to outline a model of women's culture which is not historically limited and to provide a terminology for its characteristics. Two essays by Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women" (1972) and "The 'Problem' Revisited" (1975), suggest that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group. A model of the cultural situation of women is crucial to understanding both how they are perceived by the dominant group and how they perceive themselves and others. Both historians and anthropologists emphasize the incompleteness of androcentric models of history and culture and the inadequacy of such models for the analysis of female experience. In the past, female experience which could not be accommodated by androcentric models was treated as deviant or simply ignored. Observation from an exterior point of view could never be the same as comprehension from within. Ardener's model also has many connections to and implications for current feminist literary theory, since the concepts of perception, silence, and silencing are so central to discussions of women's participation in literary culture.

By the term "muted," Ardener suggests problems both of language and of power. Both muted and dominant groups generate beliefs or ordering ideas of social reality at the unconscious level, but dominant groups control the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated. Thus muted groups must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures. Another way of putting this would be to say that all language is the language of the dominant

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order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it. How then, Ardener asks, "does the symbolic weight of that other mass of persons express itself?" In his view, women's beliefs find expression through ritual and art, expressions which can be deciphered by the ethnographer, either female or male, who is willing to make the effort to perceive beyond the screens of the dominant structure.

Let us now look at Ardener's diagram of the relationship of the dominant and the muted group:



Unlike the Victorian model of complementary spheres, Ardener's groups are represented by intersecting circles. Much of muted circle Y falls within the boundaries of dominant circle X; there is also a crescent of Y which is outside the dominant boundary and therefore (in Ardener's terminology) "wild." We can think of the "wild zone" of women's culture spatially, experientially, or metaphysically. Spatially it stands for an area which is literally no-man's-land, a place forbidden to men, which corresponds to the zone in X which is off limits to women. Experientially it stands for the aspects of the female life-style which are outside of and unlike those of men; again, there is a corresponding zone of male experience alien to women. But if we think of the wild zone metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language. In this sense, the "wild" is always imaginary; from the male point of view, it may simply be the projection of the unconscious. In terms of cultural anthropology, women know what the male crescent is like, even if they have never seen it, because it becomes the subject of legend (like the wilderness). But men do not know what is in the wild.

For some feminist critics, the wild zone, or "female space," must be the address of a genuinely women-centered criticism, theory, and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak. French feminist critics would like to make the wild zone the theoretical base of women's difference. In their texts, the wild zone becomes the place for the revolutionary women's language, the language of everything that is repressed, and for the revolutionary women's writing in "white ink." It is the Dark Continent in which Cixous' laughing Medusa and Wittig's *guerilleres* reside. Through voluntary entry into the wild zone, other feminist critics tell us, a woman can write her way out of the "cramped confines of patriarchal space."<sup>41</sup> The images of this journey are now familiar in feminist quest fictions and in essays about them. The writer/heroine, often guided by another woman, travels to the "mother country" of liberated desire and female authenticity; crossing to the other side of the mirror, like Alice in Wonderland, is often a symbol of the passage.

Many forms of American radical feminism also romantically assert that women are closer to nature, to the environment, to a matriarchal principle at once biological and ecological. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* are texts which create this feminist mythology. In English and American literature, women writers have often imagined Amazon Utopias, cities or countries situated in the wild zone or on its border: Elizabeth Gaskell's gentle *Cranford* is probably an Amazon Utopia; so is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland or, to take a recent example, Joanna Russ' *Whileaway*. A few years ago, the feminist publishing house Daughters, Inc. tried to create a business version of the Amazon Utopia; as Lois Gould reported in the *New York Times Magazine* (2 January 1977), "They believe they are building the working models for the critical next stage of feminism: full independence from the control and influence of "male-dominated"



institutions—the news media, the health, education, and legal systems, the art, theater, and literary worlds, the banks."

These fantasies of an idyllic enclave represent a phenomenon which feminist criticism must recognize in the history of women's writing. But we must also understand that there can be no writing or criticism totally outside of the dominant structure; no publication is fully independent from the economic and political pressures of the male-dominated society. The concept of a woman's text in the wild zone is a playful abstraction: in the reality to which we must address ourselves as critics, women's writing is a "double-voiced discourse" that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant. And insofar as most feminist critics are also women writing, this precarious heritage is one we share; every step that feminist criticism takes toward defining women's writing is a step toward self-understanding as well; every account of a female literary culture and a female literary tradition has parallel significance for our own place in critical history and critical tradition. Women writing are not, then, inside and outside of the male tradition; they are inside two traditions simultaneously, "undercurrents," in Ellen Moers' metaphor, of the mainstream. To mix metaphors again, the literary estate of women, as Myra Jehlen says, "suggests . . . a more fluid imagery of interacting juxtapositions, the point of which would be to represent not so much the territory, as its defining borders. Indeed, the female territory might well be envisioned as one long border, and independence for women, not as a separate country, but as open access to the sea." As Jehlen goes on to explain, an aggressive feminist criticism must poise itself on this border and must see women's writing in its changing historical and cultural relation to that other body of texts identified by feminist criticism not simply as literature but as "men's writing."

The difference of women's writing, then, can only be understood in terms of this complex and historically grounded cultural relation. An important aspect of Ardener's model is that there are muted groups other than women; a dominant structure may determine many muted structures. A black American woman poet, for example, would have her literary identity formed by the dominant (white male) tradition, by a muted women's culture, and by a muted black culture. She would be affected by both sexual and racial politics in a combination unique to her case; at the same time, as Barbara Smith points out, she shares an experience specific to her group: "Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition . . . thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually. Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share." Thus the first task of a gynocentric criticism must be to plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity and to describe the forces that intersect an individual woman writer's cultural field. A gynocentric criticism would also situate women writers with respect to the variables of literary culture, such as modes of production and distribution, relations of author and audience, relations of high to popular art, and hierarchies of genre.

Insofar as our concepts of literary periodization are based on men's writing, women's writing must be forcibly assimilated to an irrelevant grid; we discuss a Renaissance which is not a renaissance for women, a Romantic period in which women played very little part, a modernism with which women conflict. At the same time, the ongoing history of women's writing has been suppressed, leaving large and mysterious gaps in accounts of the development of genre. Gynocentric criticism is already well on the way to providing us with another perspective on literary history. Margaret Anne Doody, for example, suggests that "the period between the death of Richardson and the appearance of the novels of Scott and Austen" which has "been regarded as a dead period, a dull blank" is in fact the period in which late eighteenth-century women writers were developing "the paradigm for women's fiction of the nineteenth century—something hardly less than the paradigm of the nineteenth-century novel itself."<sup>45</sup> There has also been a feminist rehabilitation of the female gothic, a mutation of a popular genre once believed marginal but now seen as part of the great tradition of the novel. In American literature, the pioneering work of Ann Douglas, Nina Baym, and Jane Tompkins, among others, has given us a new view of the power of women's fiction to feminize nineteenth-century American culture. And feminist critics have made us aware that Woolf belonged to a tradition other than modernism and that this tradition surfaces in her

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work precisely in those places where criticism has hitherto found obscurities, evasions, implausibilities, and imperfections.

Our current theories of literary influence also need to be tested in terms of women's writing. If a man's text, as Bloom and Edward Said have maintained, is fathered, then a woman's text is not only mothered but parented; it confronts both paternal and maternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance. Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own* that "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers." But a woman writing unavoidably thinks back through her fathers as well; only male writers can forget or mute half of their parentage. The dominant culture need not consider the muted, except to rail against "the woman's part" in itself. Thus we need more subtle and supple accounts of influence, not just to explain women's writing but also to understand how men's writing has resisted the acknowledgment of female precursors.

We must first go beyond the assumption that women writers either imitate their male predecessors or revise them and that this simple dualism is adequate to describe the influences on the woman's text. I. A. Richards once commented that the influence of G. E. Moore had had an enormous negative impact on his work: "I feel like an obverse of him. Where there's a hole in him, there's a bulge in me." Too often women's place in literary tradition is translated into the crude topography of hole and bulge, with Milton, Byron, or Emerson the bulging bogeys on one side and women's literature from Aphra Behn to Adrienne Rich a pocked moon surface of revisionary lacunae on the other. One of the great advantages of the women's-culture model is that it shows how the female tradition can be a positive source of strength and solidarity as well as a negative source of powerlessness; it can generate its own experiences and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition.

How can a cultural model of women's writing help us to read a woman's text? One implication of this model is that women's fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a "dominant" and a "muted" story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a "palimpsest." I have described it elsewhere as an object/field problem in which we must keep two alternative oscillating texts simultaneously in view: "In the purest feminist literary criticism we are ... presented with a radical alteration of our vision, a demand that we see meaning in what has previously been empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint." Miller too sees "another text" in women's fiction, "more or less muted from novel to novel" but "always there to be read."

Another interpretive strategy for feminist criticism might be the contextual analysis that the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "thick description." Geertz calls for descriptions that seek to understand the meaning of cultural phenomena and products by "sorting out the structures of signification . . . and determining their social ground and import." A genuinely "thick" description of women's writing would insist upon gender and upon a female literary tradition among the multiple strata that make up the force of meaning in a text. No description, we must concede, could ever be thick enough to account for all the factors that go into the work of art. But we could work toward completeness, even as an unattainable ideal.

In suggesting that a cultural model of women's writing has considerable usefulness for the enterprise of feminist criticism, I don't mean to replace psychoanalysis with cultural anthropology as the answer to all our theoretical problems or to enthrone Ardener and Geertz as the new white fathers in place of Freud, Lacan, and Bloom. No theory, however suggestive, can be a substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women's texts which constitutes our essential subject. Cultural anthropology and social history can perhaps offer us a terminology and a diagram of women's cultural situation. But feminist critics must use this concept in relation to what women actually write, not in relation to a theoretical, political, metaphoric, or visionary ideal of what women ought to write.

I began by recalling that a few years ago feminist critics thought we were on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels. But the more precisely we understand the specificity of women's writing not as a transient by-product of sexism but as a fundamental and continually determining reality, the more clearly we realize that we have misperceived our destination. We may never reach the promised land at all; for when feminist critics see our task as the study of women's writing, we realize that the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself.

### Self-Assessment

#### 1. Choose the correct option:

- (i) Carolyn Heilbrun and Cathorine Stimpson identified ..... poles of Feminist Literary Criticism.
- |           |          |
|-----------|----------|
| (a) Three | (b) Four |
| (c) Two   | (d) One  |
- (ii) The essay "Belief and the Problems of Women was written by ..... .
- |               |                   |
|---------------|-------------------|
| (a) Showalter | (b) Edwin Ardener |
| (c) Shirley   | (d) None of these |
- (iii) The term 'Gynocritics' coined in ..... .
- |                               |                       |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (a) Toward a Feminist Poetics | (b) Cultural Feminism |
| (c) A Room of One's Own       | (d) None of these     |

### 28.3 Summary

- The feminist study of women's writings. The term is sometimes used to mean any literary criticism devoted to works written by women. More often, it designates a body of literary criticism principally produced by academic feminists in the United States between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s that sought to characterize imaginative writing by women in contrast to canonical literature written by men. Gynocriticism celebrated a distinctive "voice" in women's literature across genres and periods that it explained in terms of women's cultural position as an oppressed group; of women's experiences, especially experiences of male domination and of female bonding; and of psychological traits supposedly typical of women such as empathy and fluid ego boundaries. This approach, sometimes simplistically labeled "American feminist criticism," pioneered feminist literary history and established a canon of women's literature influential in teaching, publishing, and scholarship. By broadly endorsing women's creativity, gynocriticism overlaps "cultural feminism."
- Gynocriticism's most important precursor is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which posed influential questions about "women and literature." Following Woolf, American feminists of the late 1960s and thereafter saw imaginative literature as an important force affecting women. While some scholars attacked male writers for stereotyping women, other feminists sought role models and found energizing identifications in female characters drawn by women writers. For example, in 1972 Nancy Burr Evans rejoiced to see her "own experiences mirrored" in fiction by women (in *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon). Similarly, Louise Bernikow's *Among Women* (1980) and Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming a Heroine* (1982) emphasized the satisfactions of reading women writers who portrayed female friendships and women's search for identity.
- In "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1979), Elaine Showalter coined the term gynocritics for the study of women writers. One exemplar of this tradition was her book, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), which situated English women novelists in terms of "a common heritage" that

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concerned itself with the deliberate "articulation of women's experience." In 1976 Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* tracked "the deep creative strategies of the literary mind at work upon the fact of [being] female." Another widely influential text was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which derived common themes and images in "a distinctively female literary tradition" from cultural strictures on female expression, creativity, and authority. "Toward a Feminist Poetics" further distinguished feminist critique, the tough, demystifying practices of women reading sexist men, from gynocritics, the study of "woman as writer ... with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women." This distinction apparently pitted critical reading against creative writing, although gynocritics was, like feminist critique, a feminist reading strategy that assumed women would find personal resonance reading texts by women. In a related essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), Showalter stressed "the difference of women's writing" from men's, asking, "How can we constitute women as a distinct literary group?," answering that women developed a "double-voiced discourse" from their "muted" position in male-dominant culture. In *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985), she championed gynocritics as offering "the most exciting prospect for a coherent feminist literary theory" independent of male models and congratulated it for the "massive recovery and rereading of literature by women from all nations and historical periods." By 1989 in *Speaking of Gender*, Showalter placed gynocriticism as a past "phase" of feminist criticism that had moved on to a broader concern with gender. However, feminist analysis of women's writings continues to flourish.

- Some opponents charged that gynocritical practice was too restrictive because it selected some women writers over others, preferring poets who rejected marriage to sentimentalist encomiasts, for example, or condemning prudish novelists in favor of sexually explicit ones according to prescriptive notions of women's liberation. However, the most common attacks against gynocriticism fault the category of "writing by women" on which it is based. Some people believe this category is meaningless because differences in writing are individual, not sex specific. Pseudonymous authors prove that readers cannot reliably tell authors' sexes, and no experiments find definitive markers of female style. Some scholars argue that gynocriticism falls into the "essentialist" error of assigning definitive characteristics according to authors' biological sex, although gynocritics reply that being a woman is always culturally defined. Others agree that literature is gendered, but not necessarily to match authorial sex. Thus proponents of "écriture féminine" claim this practice maintains an antipatriarchal, feminine "subject position" even under male authorship. Another view sees gender implicit in literary genres and audience expectations, not authors, so that, for example, Harlequin romances are "feminine" no matter who writes them.
- For many feminists of color, lesbians, and postmodernists, the category "women's writing" too often generalizes from privileged white women to all women and their literature, whereas most feminists now agree that women are not a unified category but are divided by class, race, language, sexual practices, and many other factors, and that their writings must be contextualized in historically and culturally specific ways. Some radical feminists fault Showalter's version of gynocriticism from another direction, claiming it is not specific enough to women, especially to women's sexual oppression, but rather applies a paradigm of "dominant" and "muted" powers so that all oppressed groups follow parallel paths of imitation, resistance, and autonomy. In contrast, these theorists point out that each group has its unique history, character, and interests, and any writer or reader is shaped and responsive to multiple, complexly interacting, and possibly contradictory and conflicting forces.
- Although some early gynocriticism now seems naive, feminist criticism of writing by women is currently thriving. It does not automatically reject theories by men or idealize writing by women, though it continues to find women's works personally important and politically relevant to female readers. The most fruitful practice in this area uses the hypotheticalal

categories of (some kinds of) writing by (some) women to group texts in order to analyze whether or not, and how, they exhibit a gendered coherence, for example, in studies of the female gothic novel. As feminist scholars range more broadly, they discover women's literary traditions in many times and cultures without insisting that they resemble those nineteenth-century English novels central to early gynocriticism. Some women's traditions, like European Renaissance women's love lyrics, modify dominant male forms. Women's literature from more sex-segregated societies, like Persian manuscripts by and for women, may assume more autonomous shapes, and some contemporary literature, like African-American fiction by women, may set standards for writing by men, rather than the reverse.

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## 28.4 Key-Words

1. Stanza : A grouping of lines of verse, usually forming a self-contained pattern of rhymed lines—thus stanzas of a poem are normally of equal length.
2. Symbol : A figure in which one object represents another object (often an abstract quality): conventional symbols include, for example, scales for justice, a dove for peace, a goat for lust, a lion for strength, rose for beauty or love, etc. A symbol is a kind of metaphor in which the subject of the metaphor is not made explicit, and may be mysterious or undecidable.

## 28.5 Review Questions

1. What are the models in Showalter's *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness*?
2. What is the feminist criticism in *Cinderella*?
3. Elaine Showalter the feminist critic? Discuss
4. What do you mean by the Criticisms of the Biomedical Model? Discuss.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (c)                      (ii) (b)                      (iii) (a)

## 28.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Hutcheon, Linda *A poetics of postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, London: Longman, 1972.
4. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh (eds.) *A Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, London: Arnold, 1999.
5. Sethuraman, V.S. and Ramaswamy (eds.) *The English Critical Tradition, Volume II*, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1977.
6. Seturaman, V.S. (ed.) *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008.



## Unit 29: Umberto Eco's 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage' (History and War-Background)

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss about Umberto Eco.
- Explain History and War-Background.

### Introduction

Having previously established a professional rapport among scholars with his influential works in both semiotics and medieval culture. With its ingenious plot and a protagonist conflicted by spiritual and intellectual concerns, this novel enthralled both popular and critical audiences worldwide and was later adapted to film. Foremost, however, Eco is regarded as one of the world's leading semioticians whose analysis of the linguistic and aesthetic codes or "signs," by which a culture communicates and understands itself, span nearly forty years. Indeed, the philosophical themes of Eco's academic research animate his erudite fiction, which dramatizes principles of semiotic theory through multi-faceted allusions to a broad range of significant cultural artifacts. Scholars have for some time widely acknowledged Eco's brilliant and substantial contributions to semiotic thought—a discipline that Eco almost single-handedly legitimated with his own theoretical writings, according to many. Similarly, most critics of Eco's hugely popular novels have applauded his knack for making the concepts of semiotics palatable to a general audience, who have in turn prompted a resurgence of interest in his earlier works.



*Did u know?* Eco achieved literary celebrity with the publication of his best-selling first novel *Il Nome della rosa* (1980; *The Name of the Rose*).

### 29.1 Biographical Information

Eco was born on January 5, 1932, in Alessandria, Italy, the son of Guilio and Givovanna Eco. He attended the University of Turin, where he studied the philosophies and aesthetic theories of the

European Middle Ages. In 1954, he took a doctorate degree in philosophy, writing a dissertation that he later published as *Il Problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* (1956; *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*). Upon graduation Eco edited cultural programs at RAI, an Italian radio and television network, until 1959, when he began writing "Diario minimo," a monthly column for a literary magazine on the politics of popular culture—which he has continued to compose in many reincarnations for a string of periodicals throughout his career. Meanwhile, in 1956, he launched a distinguished academic career at his alma mater, the first of several positions at various Italian and American universities that eventually led him to the University of Bologna, where he has chaired the semiotics department since 1975. First as a lecturer on aesthetics and architecture, then later as a professor of visual communications and semiotics, Eco steadily produced a stream of theoretical writings. With such works as *Opera aperta* (1962; *The Open Work*), *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975; his first work originally published in English), and *Lector in fabula* (1979; *The Role of the Reader*) Eco drew respect from academicians and cultivated repute among semioticians everywhere. Hence he primarily appealed to a specialized intellectual audience—until *The Name of the Rose* appeared in 1980. By 1983 this internationally acclaimed, best-selling novel had been translated into more than twenty languages, won several of Europe's most prestigious literary prizes, and sold over twenty-five million copies worldwide. In 1986 Jean-Jacques Annaud directed a film adaptation of *The Name of the Rose* that starred Sean Connery. By the mid-1980s Eco once again returned to scholarly pursuits, publishing such works as *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984), *Travels in Hyper Reality* (1986), and *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (1986), and he contributed his editorial expertise to several English-language anthologies on semiotic theory as well. Following the publication of *Il Pendolo di Foucault* (1988; *Foucault's Pendulum*), Eco's best-selling award-winning second novel, he lectured extensively on semiotics at a number of prestigious learning institutions around the globe, some series of which are gathered in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994). As translated editions of his earlier theoretical writings became increasingly available, Eco selected various essays dating from 1985 onwards for *Il Limiti dell'interpretazione* (1990; *The Limits of Interpretation*) and *Apocalypse Postponed* (1994), and he issued *Misreadings* (1993), a translation of a selection of "Diario minimo" pieces first published in 1963, and *Il Secondo diario minimo* (1994; *How to Travel with a Salmon* (1994), a collection of previously unpublished columns. In these and other later works Eco has tended to focus on the linguistic dimensions of semiotics, writing the provocative monograph *La Ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* (*The Search for the Perfect Language*) in 1993, the novel *L'Isola del giorno prima* (*The Island of the Day Before*) in 1994, and the essay collection *Serendipities* in 1999.

## 29.2 Eco's Major Works

Eco's writings on semiotic thought, ranging from such seminal studies as *The Open Work*, *A Theory of Semiotics*, and *The Role of the Reader* to such later works as *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, *The Limits of Interpretation*, represent some of the definitive texts of the discipline, which studies the cultural meanings and production of symbols and signs, particularly in relation to both natural and artificially constructed languages. In these works Eco developed the interpretive methods and postulates for semiotic analyses of linguistic cultural artifacts that he stylistically and thematically incorporated into his own encyclopedic fiction. Adapting and often parodying the conventions of the detective genre, Eco's novels illuminate a procedural affinity between semiotic inquiry and criminal investigation as his protagonists give interpretations of elaborate systems of cultural "signs" and explanations of metaphysical phenomena to resolve equally convoluted, ancient mysteries. Cerebral in tone and rife with Latin quotations, *The Name of the Rose* is an intricately plotted, literate murder mystery cloaked with multiple meanings. At once a detective story and a semiotic novel of ideas, the narrative recreates a detailed account of medieval life, politics, and thought as it traces the murders of several monks in attendance at an ecclesiastical council at a Benedictine abbey in northern Italy in 1327. When the survivors enlist Brother William of Baskerville to deduce the mystery, a conflict arises between modern rationality and humor, represented by the humanistic William, and medieval superstition and austerity, represented by the Catholic Jorge de Burgos, the elderly blind librarian at the abbey. A

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literal and metaphoric labyrinth of possibilities and obstacles, the library houses a forbidden collection of heretical texts, which William links to the murders based on evidence of secret symbols and coded manuscripts he uncovers there. In richly allusive passages that seem to fulfill biblical prophecies of the Apocalypse, the Inquisition confounds William's search for the truth, but he eventually locates the banned text that incited the murderer – the legendary second volume of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which reputedly extols the therapeutic values of comedy. *Foucault's Pendulum* touches on many historical and religious mysteries of the last two millennia. The narrative centers on a seedy publishing house in contemporary Milan. In order to relieve the monotony of reviewing manuscripts on occultism, three editors playfully construct an extravagant conspiracy theory that combines details from their work with the spurious contents of a coded manuscript delivered by a mysterious stranger, who is later murdered. With the aid of a computer and some quixotic analogies, they create a program called the Plan in order to decipher the document, which they surmise contains a secret of the medieval Knights Templar, a papal order that fought in the Crusades. The Plan yields a 600-year-long web of arcane correlations linking the mysterious Knights to the motives of such historical figures as Rene Descartes, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Adolf Hitler; it also determines the geographical location of a potentially devastating energy source: the historical site of Foucault's pendulum in Paris. As they reconstruct human history to fit their theoretical matrix, the editors come to believe their own fabrication, and when ardent occultists learn of their secret, their esoteric extrapolation precipitates murder and human sacrifice. As the novel follows the myriad twists of the editors's ruminations, it also ultimately condemns their illogical folly. As he ponders how to reach a nearby island lying just beyond the dateline, his mind wanders through a dense catalogue of seventeenth-century minutiae on the people, places, and things that defined the culture of the 1600s. Among Eco's later nonfiction works, *The Search for the Perfect Language* chronicles the historic quest to recover the primal tongue of human language, while *Serendipities* considers how false beliefs have both beneficially and adversely changed the course of human history.



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Eco's third novel, *The Island of the Day Before*, recounts the encyclopedic musings of an early seventeenth-century Italian castaway, who cannot swim yet finds himself marooned off the Fiji Islands along the international dateline.

### 29.3 Critical Reception

Before he wrote fiction, Eco had already established a brilliant literary reputation with his specialized academic texts on medieval culture and semiotics, which many scholars have regarded as definitive, so the exuberant critical and popular reception of his first novel astonished both himself and his publishers, who have called its commercial success "phenomenal" by book-selling standards and noted the cottage industry that sprung up around the novel. Praising both the scholarship and imagination of *The Name of the Rose*, critics have universally acclaimed Eco's literary skills in the novel, especially his thorough treatment of different levels of meaning in the narrative and his impeccably designed, intellectually stimulating plotting. But commentators's opinions widely diverged on *Foucault's Pendulum* when it first appeared. Some critics disdained Eco's highly allusive style, describing it as laborious, encyclopedic, and inappropriate in a novel, yet others were intrigued by the tone of his metaphysical enquiry, favorably comparing it to the humor of Rabelais', Jonathan Swift's, and Voltaire's satires. Eco once explained that *Foucault's Pendulum* "was a book conceived to irritate the reader. I knew it would provoke ambiguous, non-homogenous responses. ..." The success of his fiction writing has simultaneously renewed interest in his academic works, ushering in the appearance of numerous English-language translations of his studies in medieval culture and semiotics. Literary scholars in the United States have consistently remarked on the diversity of Eco's allusions and the range of his themes in his theoretical writings, identifying methods and applying his paradigms to a broad spectrum of texts.

## 29.4 History and War-Background

Notes

Casablanca is a romantic melodrama set in December 1941 in the French Moroccan port of that name, which at the time was under the control of the Vichy government, who were collaborating with the Germans. It was filmed in the summer of 1942, and its plot was clearly influenced by the needs of wartime propaganda. The US had remained determinedly neutral until Pearl Harbour (7/12/1941), when it declared war on the Axis powers. On November 8<sup>th</sup> 1942 an Allied force landed at Casablanca to open the campaign in North Africa. A pre-release screening of Casablanca was arranged soon after, and President Roosevelt saw it on New Years Eve, when presumably he considered that it contained messages supportive of changing US positions on the war since 1939. It was rushed into general release on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1943, to coincide with a summit meeting held in Casablanca between Roosevelt, Churchill and French leaders, in which Roosevelt broke US-Vichy relations. In effect, Warner Brothers was able to capitalise on free publicity and the audience's familiarity with the name of the city when the film opened. One poster for the first run had the slogan 'Never anything more timely than Warner Bros Casablanca' with the title shown against a background montage of relevant news cuttings.

In the opening minutes the scene is set succinctly with the aid of a map and a newsreel-type narration. Many refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe are stuck in Casablanca hoping to fly to Lisbon and on to the safety of America, and ready to pay any price for precious exit visas. Vichy officials and other opportunists thrive on their predicament. A senior Gestapo officer has arrived to investigate the theft of transit letters, demanding full co-operation from the Vichy police chief Captain Renault. During a roundup of suspects, the precarious situation of refugees is illustrated - one scene shows a fleeing suspect without identification papers being shot in the back beneath a wall poster of Marshall Petain, the Vichy head of state - he dies clutching a resistance handbill bearing the Cross of Lorraine symbol, revealing his membership of the Free French Organisation.

Now that the isolationism of the US was at an end, Casablanca's makers were free to set the film in the early part of the war, when the Nazis over-ran most of Europe. This would have been too controversial in the preceding three years; that US neutrality was a sensitive and potentially divisive issue is illustrated by *Young Mr Lincoln*, which was made in 1939. As Hayward notes (entry on ideology p194/5), although supposedly about a figure of immense historical importance, the historical context - including the fact that the nation was divided by the Civil War - was completely absent from this film.

From the dialogue we have already been made aware that Rick's café is at the centre of everything that happens in Casablanca, and next an airport beacon - resembling a prison's circular searchlight - sweeps across its entrance, emphasising the forced confinement of those in the city. To reinforce this the camera enters and eavesdrops on groups of black marketeers and would-be escapees of different nationalities at tables inside. Then a brief series of shots introduces Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and is designed to align the viewer's consciousness to his. First his hand is seen signing an advance slip (at 8.28 from start); the shot is positioned so that it appears that a (right-handed) person in the audience is reaching up to the screen to sign the slip. Then the camera pans up to his expressionless face as he drags on a cigarette; he is playing a solitary game of chess while monitoring activities in the casino. Moments later, when he confronts a pompous German who has been denied entry, his whole body emerges from the viewer's space as he walks into the frame (9.03). Presumably the director, Michael Curtiz, felt the need positively to persuade viewers to identify with Rick because he is not immediately likeable or worthy of admiration, in contrast to resistance leader Victor Laszlo, a more attractive heroic character who consistently articulates anti-Nazi sentiments. Also, as the story centres on Rick's redemption from unmediated self-interest to active involvement in the Allied cause, and most of what happens takes its logic from Rick's point of view, Curtiz wanted to discourage the audience from having to make a choice between Rick and Laszlo.

Casablanca is now considered one of the best examples of Hollywood filmmaking in its 'Golden Age'. (For example, in 1998 it was voted 2<sup>nd</sup> within the American Film Institute's '100 Greatest American Films', beaten only by *Citizen Kane*). It has been criticised for containing a hotch-potch

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of archetypes, and for its characters having questionable psychological credibility, probably because of its somewhat haphazard production, with the script still being written while shooting was underway (see Umberto Eco: 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage' (1985) quoted in article by Krin Gabbard in [www.jahsonic.com](http://www.jahsonic.com)). Also, its visual style is nothing special, and many modern viewers will find the unsubtle propaganda messages rather distracting, if understandable given when it was made. (For example: (1) Ferrare says to Rick 'When will you realize that in this world today, isolationism is no longer a practical policy?' (13.50); (2) Having refused to betray resistance leaders Laszlo says to Strasser: 'And what if you track down these men and kill them? What if you murdered all of us? From every corner of your Republic thousands would rise to take our places. Even Nazis can't kill that fast.' (50.58); (3) Renault kicking the Vichy water bottle into a waste bin (1:37.08).)

But its strengths lie in its spare, cynical dialogue replete with recognisable one-liners, allied to a tightly constructed plot and narrative structure that focuses the audience's attention on a process of revelation by introducing unresolved clues which prompt the spectator to anticipate events they do not yet understand. At the same time the excellent cinematography and the faultless acting persuade us that the film is presenting the most readily comprehensible depiction of events. This in turn encourages viewers to concentrate on following the plot and identifying with the characters as they deal with the crisis that unfolds. Richard Maltby says 'In Casablanca the audience is attached to the film by the process of the revealing of the story, not by the facts of the story's revelations, ... and 'the ordering of events attaches the spectator emotionally to its characters as benevolent sources of meaning and significance.'

One example of the revelatory narrative is the introduction of Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) and the disclosure of her previous relationship with Rick. Up to this point the focus has been on the setting, Rick's cynical isolationism, and the opening plot involving theft of the coveted letters of transit. Ilsa and Laszlo are first seen entering Rick's café (24.15) in a long medium tracking shot which takes them past Sam at the piano. Sam and Ilsa appear to recognise one another; Sam looks worried and shakes his head. Ilsa and Laszlo are joined by Renault, and Ilsa asks him about Sam: 'somewhere I've seen him', a remark whose significance is pointed up by its delivery in extreme close-up. Renault supplies an enigmatic description of Rick and its impact on Ilsa is again shown in close-up. The group is joined by Major Strasser and the conversation moves on, but the disruptive influence of Rick's likely presence on Ilsa is registered by the repetition of close shots of Bergman, separating her from the men's discussion. These signals are not immediately pursued, but once Ilsa is left alone at her table she calls Sam to join her. He tells her that Rick has another girlfriend, but Ilsa is unconvinced and asks him to play *As Time Goes By*, for old times' sake (30.53). A song whose associations are not revealed until later (it features in the scene in the Paris bar in the flashback sequence (41.00)) is made significant by it being played over a still, melancholic close-up of Bergman that lasts for 15 seconds (31.27 to 31.52), noticeably longer than any previous shot.

*As Time Goes By* was originally written for a 1931 Broadway show and would have been well known to 1943 audiences, enhancing their understanding of Ilsa and Rick's reaction to it. It is subsequently used as linking music; many commentators on *Casablanca* cite the subliminal but nostalgically potent music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, as a key factor in its success. As well as *As Time Goes By* it includes several popular 1940s big band tunes including *It Had To Be You*, *Shine*, and the appropriately titled *You Got Trouble* (*Knock On Wood*) which Sam performs in full to the café clientele.

The existence of a bond between Rick and Ilsa is confirmed when *As Time Goes By* draws Rick to the table, and by the inter-cutting of extreme close-ups of their faces reinforced by a musical pulse on the sound track to signal a dramatic event. (Musical pointers to emphasise tense moments are used sparingly in *Casablanca*, making this one more noticeable.) This first close-up of Bogart in the film is significant – slightly closer than normal, using a wider angle lens than previously, with the viewpoint slightly above Bogart's eyeline. The audience would have subliminally registered these variations from the norm and assume they have meaning – in this case surprise and discomfort – without them being articulated explicitly, or markedly disrupting the flow of images. Maltby sums it up neatly: 'At this point, with the nature of their involvement completely unstated by the



same means that it has been declared central to the narrative, Renault and Strasser re-appear to change the subject and the couple spend the rest of the conversation exchanging looks (via more close-ups) and reminiscences of their last meeting ("The Germans wore grey, you wore blue"). Then, once Ilsa and Laszlo have left the club, when he asks about Rick she is non-committal and at this point passes through a shadow (34.12), implying that something is being concealed. The audience is drawn into a process of revelation without yet fully understanding what is to be revealed.

Ilsa's re-appearance propels Rick into a heavy drinking session during which his face is shown in half-shadow in the darkened café, illuminated only by the swooping beacon from outside, complementing his depressive mood. He makes an obvious reference to Pearl Harbour: 'It's December 1941 in Casablanca. What time is it in New York? I bet they're asleep in New York. I bet they're asleep all over America.' This retrospective warning appears to be designed to confirm in the (US) audience's mind that joining the war was right and possibly overdue. The drinking binge leads to a flashback sequence of happier times in a whirlwind romance with Ilsa in Paris immediately before the German occupation in 1940; the full lighting of the initial scene immediately lifting the mood. The flashback includes dramatic documentary newsfilm of the Nazi blitzkrieg leading to scenes involving Rick and Ilsa where historic details are communicated via newspaper headlines and tannoy announcements including 'Paris is an Open City', 'The population is advised to evacuate', and 'Italy declares war on us'.

It is pertinent to note that these events took place only two years before the film was made. When Ilsa fails to join him on the Marseilles train to freedom, the encroachment of war is linked to the split in their personal relationship. These scenes would have resonated strongly with the wartime audience, many of whom would have relationships disrupted or ended because of the war. The flashback is positioned at this point in the narrative to provide a partial exposé of events from Rick's point of view, to explain his mood and to switch attention to his relationship with Ilsa. At the end of his reminiscing, the camera pans from left to right to Rick dozing drunkenly in right foreground and knocking over his whisky glass - a parallel to Ilsa knocking over her glass in the Paris flashback after she asks 'Kiss me as if it were the last time.'

Rick is repositioned to the left when suddenly the café door opens and Ilsa is seen in the distance in the middle of the screen, strikingly spotlighted in a shaft of light - almost as if in Rick's dream. To support the narrative structure, each scene in Casablanca advances the plot by confirming what could be derived from previous scenes, and adding further information. This provides continuity and information about characters' motivations. Rick's drunken condition exposes his inner sentiments behind the hard cynical exterior when he dismisses Ilsa's roundabout explanation of why she abandoned him in Paris, and his continued feelings for her are confirmed when he directly asks again the next day in the market (54.30), and Ilsa reveals Laszlo is, and was then, her husband.

The transformation of the character of Rick from determined neutrality and self-preserving interest (embodied in the repeated 'I stick my neck out for nobody') to full engagement (killing the Gestapo commandant in the process of assisting Laszlo and Ilsa to escape) can be interpreted as an analogy for the historical process of evolving US policy towards involvement in the war (It is easy to overlook the widespread support for Fascism among political and business leaders in the US during the period 1938-40. For example, Roosevelt openly approved of the 1938 dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by Germany and in 1939 was quoted as regarding Mussolini's regime in Italy as 'of great importance to the world - though still in the experimental stage.' (see Chomsky p68)). The dialogue reveals that Rick has a background of idealistic support for lost causes in opposition to the Axis powers: he was involved in running guns to the Ethiopians when they were invaded by Italy (which would have made him liable to prosecution in the US), and fighting on the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War. But his idealism clearly needs re-kindling, and the narrative offers several potential turning points, each of which might also be seen as a metaphor for a real historical event. These include his intervention at the roulette wheel on behalf of the Bulgarian couple, his agreement to the Marseillaise being played in his café in opposition to the German patriotic song, and the frank discussion with Laszlo after he has been injured.

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Immediately before this last scene Rick's confrontation with Ilsa (1:16.16 onwards) draws out their true feelings. She begs for visas and pulls a gun when he refuses, still exhibiting bitterness about Paris ('As long as I have those letters I'll never be lonely'). But then she crumbles, restates her love and submits to his will ('I don't know what's right any longer. You have to think for the two of us. For all of us.') when it is clear his feelings for her remain strong. This is one of many emotional moments for Bergman's character, during which there are several shots of her face in various degrees of close-up. In *Casablanca* Bergman was in her artistic and visual prime, exuding qualities variously described as a kittenish sexuality and a country girl wholesomeness. Audiences had been waiting for a suitable follow up to her much admired Hollywood debut in *Intermezzo* three years earlier. David Shipman says she is 'superbly right and completely magical' as Ilsa, and that 'she and Bogart were memorable together and the film was a solid gold hit', which set her up to become one of the biggest Hollywood stars of the 1940s (in entry for Bergman in *The Great Movie Stars Vol 1*). Both leading actors would be forever associated with these roles. Bogart had finally achieved star rating via *High Sierra* and *The Maltese Falcon* the previous year, after twelve years in minor parts and poor movies. He cleverly portrays Rick as a complicated man torn between an idealistic past and a bitter present; his success in *Casablanca* (including an Oscar nomination) enabled him to broaden from hard-boiled gangsters to romantic leads, notably his films with Lauren Bacall. The confrontation scene leads to an ingenious closing plot sequence packed into the final 12 minutes in which Rick contrives a situation in which Ilsa and Laszlo escape together, while he gets away with murder and keeps Renault on side. Film critic Roger Ebert asserts that this sequence 'combines suspense, romance and comedy as they have rarely been brought together on screen'. Although *Casablanca* has dark themes of repression, danger and lost love, the mood is not allowed to become too serious because of the dry humour embedded in the sardonic dialogue exchanges, particularly those involving Rick and Renault. To further lighten the tone there are also some specifically comedic moments: a pickpocket lifts a wallet, then bumps into Carl, who recognises him and immediately checks his own pockets (58.48); the bartender kisses Rick on both cheeks (1:7.20) after he has rigged the roulette wheel for the Bulgarian couple; an elderly couple trying out their sparse English on Carl have trouble telling the time (1:1.45) (He: 'What watch?'; She: 'Ten watch'; He: 'Such much?'; Carl: 'You'll get along beautifully in America'); and Renault accepting his casino winnings immediately after he has closed Rick's ostensibly because he is 'shocked to find that gambling has been going on'.

It is known that there were two scripts for the last day of shooting. With hindsight it is clear that the version that was not used, which kept Rick and Ilsa together, would have diminished the overall impact of the film, because it would have tarnished Rick with self-interest. The ending actually filmed allows Rick a dignified exit, and a resolution of the inner turmoil between his feelings for Ilsa and his hatred of the Nazis. It also enables the audience to feel good about his self-sacrifice ('I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world') and of his continued participation in the French Resistance alongside Renault.

The richness of the supporting characters is also important: the corrupt owner of the rival club, the weasily black marketeer, the heartless Gestapo commandant, and others, create a moral backdrop for the crisis facing the lead characters and the decisions they take. Best of all is Claude Rains as Renault, who manages a perfect balance between corrupt self-interest ('I blow with the wind' - a cynical reference to the Vichy government) and personal charm. In some ways he is the chief villain, but Rains makes him a sympathetic, amusing and believable character.

Within the Rick/ Laszlo/ Ilsa emotional triangle Rick can be seen as the flawed hero outcast from his own land, contrasted with Laszlo's official/ uncontaminated hero. From this perspective the film provides a reassuring message that the American outlaw figure, and by extension the American nation as a whole, can be true to their instincts even in a world war, a conflict they were originally loathe to join. (In the Western the outlaw hero usually needs a semi-corrupt law official to help him escape; Renault fills that role here.) As Gabbard observes '*Casablanca* offers the viewer benign regression to a moment when right and wrong were clear cut and going off to war could be a deeply romantic gesture.'

Casablanca is now over 60 years old and in many respects is very much a film of its (specific) time: there is a liberal sprinkling of rather crude wartime propaganda, it was made in black and white entirely on studio sets, and, typically for the period, everyone appears immaculately dressed throughout and seem to survive on bourbon and champagne cocktails. There is, therefore, much debate about the reasons for its enduring appeal. Undoubtedly its legendary status plays a part, by promoting interest and respect from new generations of viewers, that would otherwise not be granted a film of this vintage. This apart, it can be argued that it deserves admiration for its rich combination of skilfully drawn, three-dimensional characters, a cleverly constructed plot that maintains tension and keeps going right to the last frame, its nostalgic music, Ingrid Bergman's luminous natural beauty, the amusing snappy dialogue, and flawless cinematic execution. As an NFT reviewer concluded '... the sum of its many marvellous parts far exceeds the whole.' (National Film Theatre review 1974, quoted in Halliwell's Film Guide)

## 29.5 Eco's Writing

The original play was inspired by a trip to Europe made by Murray Burnett in 1938, during which he visited Vienna shortly after the Anschluss, where he saw discrimination by Nazis first-hand. In the south of France, he came across a nightclub, which had a multinational clientele and the prototype of Sam, the black piano player. In the play, the Ilsa character was an American named Lois Meredith and did not meet Laszlo until after her relationship with Rick in Paris had ended; Rick was a lawyer. To make Rick's motivation more believable, Wallis, Curtiz, and the screenwriters decided to set the film before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The first writers assigned to the script were the Epstein twins, Julius and Philip who, against the wishes of Warner Brothers, left the project after the attack on Pearl Harbor to work with Frank Capra on the *Why We Fight* series in Washington, D.C. While they were gone, the other credited writer, Howard Koch was assigned to the script and produced some thirty to forty pages. When the Epstein brothers returned after a month, they were reassigned to Casablanca and – contrary to what Koch claimed in two published books – his work was not used. In the final Warner Brothers budget for the film, the Epsteins were paid \$30,416 and Koch \$4,200.

The uncredited Casey Robinson assisted with three weeks of rewrites, including contributing the series of meetings between Rick and Ilsa in the cafe. Koch highlighted the political and melodramatic elements, while Curtiz seems to have favored the romantic parts, insisting on retaining the Paris flashbacks. Wallis wrote the final line ("Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.") after shooting had been completed. Bogart had to be called in a month after the end of filming to dub it. Despite the many writers, the film has what Ebert describes as a "wonderfully unified and consistent" script. Koch later claimed it was the tension between his own approach and Curtiz's which accounted for this: "Surprisingly, these disparate approaches somehow meshed, and perhaps it was partly this tug of war between Curtiz and me that gave the film a certain balance." Julius Epstein would later note the screenplay contained "more corn than in the states of Kansas and Iowa combined. But when corn works, there's nothing better."

### Initial Response

*Casablanca* received "consistently good reviews". Bosley Crowther of The New York Times wrote, "The Warners... have a picture which makes the spine tingle and the heart take a leap." The newspaper applauded the combination of "sentiment, humor and pathos with taut melodrama and bristling intrigue". While he noted its "devious convolutions of the plot", he praised the screenplay quality as "of the best" and the cast's performances as "all of the first order".

The trade paper *Variety* commended the film's "combination of fine performances, engrossing story and neat direction" and the "variety of moods, action, suspense, comedy and drama that makes Casablanca an A-1 entry at the b.o.". The paper applauded the performances of Bergman and Henreid and analyzed Bogart's own: "Bogart, as might be expected, is more at ease as the bitter and cynical operator of a joint than as a lover, but handles both assignments with superb finesse." *Variety* wrote of the film's real-world impact, "Film is splendid anti-Axis propaganda,

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particularly inasmuch as the propaganda is strictly a by-product of the principal action and contributes to it instead of getting in the way." Some other reviews were less enthusiastic: The New Yorker rated it only "pretty tolerable".

### Lasting Impact

The film has grown in popularity. Murray Burnett called it "true yesterday, true today, true tomorrow". By 1955, the film had brought in \$6.8 million, making it only the third most successful of Warners' wartime movies (behind *Shine On, Harvest Moon* and *This is the Army*). On April 21, 1957, the Brattle Theater of Cambridge, Massachusetts, showed the film as part of a season of old movies. It was so popular that it began a tradition of screening *Casablanca* during the week of final exams at Harvard University which continues to the present day, and is emulated by many colleges across the United States. Todd Gitlin, a professor of sociology who himself attended one of these screenings, had said that the experience was, "the acting out of my own personal rite of passage". The tradition helped the movie remain popular while other famous films of the 1940s have faded away, and by 1977, *Casablanca* was the most frequently broadcast film on American television.

On the film's 50th anniversary, the *Los Angeles Times* called *Casablanca's* great strength "the purity of its Golden Age Hollywoodness [and] the enduring craftsmanship of its resonantly hokey dialogue". The newspaper believed the film achieved a "near-perfect entertainment balance" of comedy, romance, and suspense.

According to Roger Ebert, *Casablanca* is "probably on more lists of the greatest films of all time than any other single title, including *Citizen Kane*" because of its wider appeal. Ebert opined that *Citizen Kane* is generally considered to be a "greater" film but *Casablanca* is more loved. Ebert said that he has never heard of a negative review of the film, even though individual elements can be criticized, citing unrealistic special effects and the stiff character/portrayal of Laszlo. Rudy Behlmer emphasized the variety in the picture: "it's a blend of drama, melodrama, comedy [and] intrigue".

Ebert has said that the film is popular because "the people in it are all so good" and that it is "a wonderful gem". As the Resistance hero, Laszlo is ostensibly the most noble, although he is so stiff that he is hard to like. The other characters, in Behlmer's words, are "not cut and dried": they come into their goodness in the course of the film. Renault begins the film as a collaborator with the Nazis, who extorts sexual favors from refugees and has Ugarte killed. Rick, according to Behlmer, is "not a hero,... not a bad guy": he does what is necessary to get along with the authorities and "sticks his neck out for nobody". Even Ilsa, the least active of the main characters, is "caught in the emotional struggle" over which man she really loves. By the end of the film, however, "everybody is sacrificing."

There are a few dissenting reviewers. According to Pauline Kael, "It's far from a great film, but it has a special appealingly schlocky romanticism..."<sup>[70]</sup> Umberto Eco wrote that "by any strict critical standards... *Casablanca* is a very mediocre film." He viewed the changes the characters undergo as inconsistent rather than complex: "It is a comic strip, a hotch-potch, low on psychological credibility, and with little continuity in its dramatic effects."

There is anecdotal evidence that *Casablanca* may have made a deeper impression among film-lovers than within the professional movie-making establishment. In the November/December 1982 issue of *American Film*, Chuck Ross claimed that he retyped the screenplay to *Casablanca*, only changing the title back to *Everybody Comes to Rick's* and the name of the piano player to Dooley Wilson, and submitted it to 217 agencies. Eighty-five of them read it; of those, thirty-eight rejected it outright, thirty-three generally recognized it (but only eight specifically as *Casablanca*), three declared it commercially viable, and one suggested turning it into a novel. Hugh Hefner cited it as part of his motivation to open up the Playboy Club.

### Influence on Later Works

Many subsequent films have drawn on elements of *Casablanca*. *Passage to Marseille* reunited Bogart, Rains, Curtiz, Greenstreet and Lorre in 1944, while there are many similarities between *Casablanca*

and two later Bogart films, *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and *Sirocco* (1951). Parodies have included the Marx Brothers' *A Night in Casablanca* (1946), Neil Simon's *The Cheap Detective* (1978), and *Out Cold* (2001), while it provided the title for the 1995 hit *The Usual Suspects*. Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) appropriated Bogart's *Casablanca* persona as the fantasy mentor for Allen's nebbishy character, featuring actor Jerry Lacy in the role of Bogart.

*Casablanca* itself was a plot device in the science-fiction television movie *Overdrawn at the Memory Bank* (1983), based on John Varley's story, and made a similar, though much less pivotal, appearance in Terry Gilliam's dystopian *Brazil* (1985). Warner Bros. produced its own parody of the film in the homage *Carrotblanca*, a 1995 Bugs Bunny cartoon. In *Casablanca*, a novella by Argentine writer Edgar Brau, the protagonist somehow wanders into Rick's Café Americain and listens to a strange tale related by Sam.

## 29.6 Summary

- *Casablanca* has been subjected to many different readings. Semioticians account for the film's popularity by claiming that its inclusion of a whole series of stereotypes paradoxically strengthens the film. Umberto Eco explained: Thus *Casablanca* is not just one film. It is many films, an anthology. [...] When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion.
- Eco also singled out sacrifice as one of the film's key themes: "the myth of sacrifice runs through the whole film." It was this theme which resonated with a wartime audience that was reassured by the idea that painful sacrifice and going off to war could be romantic gestures done for the greater good. Koch also considered the film a political allegory. Rick is compared to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who gambled "on the odds of going to war until circumstance and his own submerged nobility force him to close his casino (partisan politics) and commit himself – first by financing the Side of Right and then by fighting for it." The connection is reinforced by the film's title, which means "white house".
- Harvey Greenberg presents a Freudian reading in his *The Movies on Your Mind*, in which the transgressions which prevent Rick from returning to the U.S. constitute an Oedipus complex, which is resolved only when Rick begins to identify with the father figure of Laszlo and the cause which he represents. Sidney Rosenzweig argues that such readings are reductive, and that the most important aspect of the film is its ambiguity, above all in the central character of Rick; he cites the different names which each character gives Rick (Richard, Ricky, Mr. Rick, Herr Blaine and so on) as evidence of the different meanings which he has for each person.

## Self-Assessment

### 1. Choose the correct option:

- The best setting rural of eco is ..... .
  - Nome della rosa
  - Cosablanca
  - The Aesthetics of Themias
  - None of these
- Eco was born on January 5th, ..... .
  - 1930
  - 1931
  - 1932
  - 1941
- The novel the Island of the day before, is the ..... novel of eco.
  - 1st
  - 2nd
  - 3rd
  - None of these
- The purting of its Golden Age Hollywoodness – refers to ..... .
  - American
  - Casablanca
  - Passage to Marscille
  - None of these



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### 29.7 Key-Words

1. Affective fallacy : Term used by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley to designate what they see as the error of making subjective responses (cognitive or emotional) the criteria for interpretive, critical or aesthetic judgements.
2. Allegory : (Gk. 'other speaking') a narrative which—through allusion, metaphor, symbolism, etc. can be read not simply on its own terms but as telling another, quite different story at the same time.
3. Alliteration : Repeated consonant sounds, particularly at the beginning of words, e.g. 'kiddies' clobber', 'mountains of moonstone'.

### 29.8 Review Questions

1. Discuss Umberto Eco's life and work.
2. What are the major works of Umberto Eco?
3. Explain history and war background.
4. Write a short note on Casablanca.

### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (c)                      (iii) (c)                      (iv) (b)

### 29.9 Further Readings



*Books*

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## Unit 30: Umberto Eco's 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage' (Textual Analysis)

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Eco's Casablanca.
- Analyse Eco's Casablanca.

### Introduction

All texts, whether they are spoken or written, make their meanings against the background of other texts and things that have been said on other occasions (Lemke 1992). Texts may more or less implicitly or explicitly cite other texts, they may refer to other texts, or they may allude to other past, or future, texts. We thus 'make sense of every word, every utterance, or act against the background of (some) other words, utterances, acts of a similar kind' (Lemke 1995: 23). All texts are, thus, in an intertextual relationship with other texts.

Umberto Eco (1987) provides an interesting discussion of inter-textuality in his chapter 'Casablanca: Cult movies and intertextual collage'. Eco points out that the film Casablanca was made on a very small budget and in a very short time. As a result its creators were forced to improvise the plot, mixing a little of everything they knew worked in a movie as they went. The result is what Eco describes as an 'intertextual collage'. For Eco, Casablanca has been so successful because it is not, in fact, an instance of a single kind of film genre but a mixing of stereotyped situations that are drawn from a number of different kinds of film genres. As the film proceeds, he argues, we recognize the film genres that they recall. We also recognize the pleasures we have experienced when we have watched these kinds of films.

The first few scenes of Casablanca, for example, recall film genres such as the adventure movie, the patriotic movie, news reels, war propaganda movies, gangster movies, action movies, spy movies and finally, with the appearance of Ingrid Bergman, a romance. The poster for this movie suggests a number of these film genres, but people who have seen the movie would most likely describe it as a romance. As Brown (1992: 7) observes, the chemistry between its two stars Humphrey Bogard and Ingrid Bergman 'was so thick it would make movie history' and defines Casablanca movie romance for all time. It is not, however, just a romance. It is, rather, a mixing of types of film, in which one of the major themes is the relationship between the two lead players, set in a world of action, adventure, spies, gangsters and of course, romance.

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### **30.1 Intertextual Analysis**

A cult film, also commonly referred to as a cult classic, is a film that has acquired a cult following with a specific group of fans. Often, cult movies have failed to achieve fame outside small fanbases; however, there are exceptions that have managed to gain fame among mainstream audiences. Many cult movies have gone on to transcend their original cult status and have become recognized as classics. Cult films often become the source of a thriving, obsessive, and elaborate subculture of fandom, hence the analogy to cults. However, not every film with a devoted fanbase is necessarily a cult film. Usually, cult films have limited but very special, noted appeal. Cult films are often known to be eccentric, often do not follow traditional standards of mainstream cinema and usually explore topics not considered in any way mainstream-yet there are examples that are relatively normal. Many are often considered controversial because they step outside standard narrative and technical conventions.

A cult film is a movie that attracts a devoted group of followers or obsessive fans, often despite having failed commercially on its initial release. The term also describes films that have remained popular over a long period of time amongst a small group of followers. Although they may only have a short cinema life, cult films often enjoy ongoing popularity through long runs on video, thus being issued in video "runs" with more copies than other movies. The movie *Office Space* (1999), which lost money during its box office run, managed to turn significant profits when word-of-mouth made it a popular video rental and purchase. *Harold and Maude* (1971) was not successful financially at the time of its original release, but has since earned a cult following and has become successful following its video and DVD releases. Many cult films were independent films and were not expected by their creators to have mainstream success. Sometimes the audience response to a cult film is somewhat different than what was intended by the film makers. Cult films usually offer something different or innovative in comparison to mainstream films, but cult films can also be popular across a wide audience.

A film can be both a major studio release and a cult film, particularly if despite its affiliation with a major studio, it failed to achieve broad success on either the theatrical or home video markets but was championed by a small number of dedicated film fanatics who seek out lesser-known offerings. It is also true that the content of certain films (such as dark subjects, alienation, transgressive content, or other controversial subject matter) can also decide whether or not a film is a "cult film", regardless of the film's budget or studio affiliations. An example may be Paul Verhoeven's big budgeted, highly sexualized *Showgirls* (1995), initially intended to be a drama film about the rise of a Las Vegas stripper, that flopped both critically and commercially when released theatrically; afterward, it enjoyed success on the home video market, generating more than \$100 million from video rentals. Today, it is a favorite of gay audiences and audiences in general have considered it to be a comedy thanks to frequent midnight movie showings. According to activist writer Naomi Klein, ironic enjoyment of the film initially arose among those with the video before MGM, the film's chief marketer, capitalized on the idea. MGM noticed the video was performing well since "trendy twenty-somethings were throwing *Showgirls* irony parties, laughing sardonically at the implausibly poor screenplay and shrieking with horror at the aerobic sexual encounters."

### **30.2 Text – Casablanca**

#### **30.2.1 Cult**

"Was it the cannon fire or is my heart pounding?" Whenever *Casablanca* is shown, at this point the audience reacts with an enthusiasm usually reserved for football. Sometimes a single word is enough: fans cry every time Bogey says "kid." Frequently the spectators quote the best lines before they are uttered. According to the traditional standards of cinematic aesthetics, *Casablanca* is not a work of art-if such an expression still means anything. In any case, if the films of Dreyer, Eisenstein, or Antonioni are works of art, *Casablanca* presents a very modest aesthetic achievement. It is a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly; its characters are psychologically incredible, its actors act in a manneristic way. Nevertheless, it is a great example of cinematic

discourse, a palimpsest for the future students of twentieth-century religiosity, a paramount laboratory for semiotic research in textual strategies. Moreover, it has become a cult movie. What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests, and whose adepts recognize each other through a common competence. Of course all these elements (characters and episodes) must have some archetypal appeal, as we shall see. One can ask and answer questions about the various stations of the subway in New York or Paris only if these spots have become or have been taken as mythical areas, and such names as "Canarsy Line" or "Vincennes- Neuilly" do not only stand for physical places, but become the catalyzers of collective memories.

It is curious how a book can give rise to a cult even though it is a great work of art. Both *The Three Musketeers* and *The Divine Comedy* rank among the cult books - and there are more trivia games among the fans of Dante than among the fans of Dumas. On the contrary, I suspect, a cult movie must display some organic imperfections: it seems that the boastful *Rio Bravo* is a cult movie whereas the great *Stagecoach* is not. I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to unhinge it, to break it up or take it apart so that one then may remember only parts of it, regardless of their original relationship to the whole. With a book, one can unhinge it manually, so to speak, dismembering it into a series of excerpts. A movie, on the contrary, must be already wobbly and disjointed in itself. For a perfect movie, which cannot be reread every time we want or from the place we choose, as it happens with a book, remains in our memory as a whole, in the form of a central idea or emotion; only a disjointed movie survives as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visionary icebergs. To become cult, a movie should not display a central idea but many. It should not exhibit a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on in and because of its glorious incoherence. However, it must have some qualities.

Let me say that it may be disjointed from the point of view of its production (in the sense that nobody knew exactly what had to be done - as is evidently the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), but yet it must display certain textual features since, beyond the conscious control of the producer, it has become a sort of textual syllabus, a living example of living textuality. In the face of this, the addressee must suspect that it is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, and all together they speak to and with one another independently of the intentions of their authors.

A cult movie is the proof that, as literature comes from literature, cinema also comes from cinema. Which are the elements of a movie that can be dislocated from the whole and adored for themselves? In order to go on with this analysis of *Casablanca*, I should use some important semiotic categories, such as the ones (provided by the Russian Formalists) of theme and motif. I confess that I find very difficult to ascertain what the various Russian Formalists meant by motif. If according to Veselovskij a motif is the simplest narrative unit, then one wonders why "fire from heaven" should belong to the same category as "the persecuted maid" (since the former can be represented by an image, while the latter requires a certain narrative development). It would be interesting to follow Tomacevskij and to look, in *Casablanca*, for free and tied motifs or for dynamic and static motifs. We should distinguish between more or less universal narrative functions à la Propp, visual stereotypes like the Cynic Adventurer, and more complex archetypal situations like the Unhappy Love. I hope that someone will do such a job, but let me today assume, more prudently (and borrowing the concept from the research in artificial intelligence), the more flexible notion of "frame." In my *The Role of the Reader* I distinguished between common and intertextual frames. By common frame I meant data-structures for representing stereotyped situations like dining at a restaurant or going to the railway station; that is, a sequence of actions which are more or less coded by our normal competence. And by intertextual frames I meant stereotyped situations coming from the previous textual tradition and recorded by our encyclopedia, such as, for example, the duel between the sheriff and the bad guy or the narrative situation in which the Hero fights against the Villain and wins; as well as more macroscopic textual situations, such as the story of the vierges ouillee or the classical scene of the recognition (Bakhtin considered this a motif, in the

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sense of a chronotope). We could distinguish between stereotyped intertextual frames (for instance, the Drunkard Redeemed by Love) and stereotyped iconographical units (for instance, the Evil Nazi). But since even these iconographical units, when they appear in a movie, if they do not directly elicit an action, at least suggest its possible development, we can use the notion of intertextual frame to cover both. We are interested, moreover, in finding out those frames which not only are recognizable by the audience as belonging to a sort of ancestral intertextual tradition, but which also display a particular fascination. "A suspect who escapes a pass control and is shot by the police" is undoubtedly an intertextual frame, but it does not have a "magic" flavor. Let us take intuitively the idea of "magic" frame. Let us define as "magic" those frames which, when appearing in a movie, and when then separated from the whole, transform this movie into a cult movie. In Casablanca we can find more intertextual frames than "magic" intertextual frames. Let us call these latter intertextual archetypes. The term "archetype" here does not pretend to have any particular psycho-analytic or mythic connotation, but serves only to indicate a pre-established and frequently re-appearing narrative situation that is cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts, and provokes in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a *dejavu* that everybody yearns to see again. I would not say that an intertextual archetype is necessarily "universal." It can belong to a rather recent textual tradition, as it happens with certain "topoi" of slapstick comedy. It is sufficient to consider it as a *topos* or standard situation that comes to be particularly appealing to a given cultural area or historical period.

### 30.2.2 The Making of "Casablanca"

"Can I tell you a story?" asks Ilse. Then she adds: "I don't know the ending yet." Rick says: "Go on. Tell it. Maybe one'll come to you as you go along." Rick's line is a sort of epitome of Casablanca itself. According to Ingrid Bergman, it seems that the film was being made at the same time as it was being shot. Until the last moment not even Michael Curtiz knew whether Ilse would leave with Rick or with Victor, and it is plausible that Ingrid Bergman appears so fascinatingly mysterious because she did not know which man she should look at more tenderly. This explains why, in the story, she in fact does not choose her fate, but rather is chosen. When you do not know how to deal with a story, you put in it stereotyped situations because you know that they, at least, have already worked elsewhere. Take a marginal but revealing example. Each time Laszlo orders something to drink (and it happens four times) he changes his choice: (i) cointreau, (ii) cocktail, (iii) cognac, and (iv) whiskey (once he drinks champagne but does not ask for it). Why such confusing and confused drinking habits in a man endowed with an ascetic temper? There is no psychological reason for that. My guess is simply that each time Curtiz was quoting, unconsciously, similar situations in other movies and trying to provide a reasonably complete sampling. Thus one is tempted to read Casablanca as T. S. Eliot read Hamlet, attributing its fascination not to the fact that it was a successful work (actually he considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate efforts), but to the imperfection of its composition. He viewed Hamlet as the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier versions of the story, so that the puzzling ambiguity of the main character was due to the author's difficulty in putting together different topics. So both critics and public find Hamlet beautiful because it is interesting, believing it is interesting because it is beautiful. On a smaller scale the same thing happened to Casablanca. Forced to improvise a plot, the authors whipped up a little of everything, and everything they put in came from a repertoire that had stood the test of time. When only a few stock formulas are used, the result is simply kitsch. But when the repertoire of formulas is used wholesale, then the result is an architecture like Gaudi's Holy Family Church—the same vertigo, the same stroke of genius.

### 30.3.3 Stop By Stop

Every story plays upon one or more archetypes. Usually, to make a good story a single archetype is enough. But Casablanca is not satisfied with that: it uses them all. It would be nice to identify our archetypes scene by scene and shot by shot, stopping the tape at every relevant step. Every time I have scanned Casablanca with very cooperative research groups, the whole business has taken many hours. Besides, when a team starts this kind of game, the chances of stopping the videotape grow proportionally according to the size of the audience. Each member of the team sees something



the others did not, and many start projecting into the movie their memories of other movies made after Casablanca -which seems to be the normal situation for a cult movie and which suggests that perhaps the best deconstructive readings should be made upon unhinged texts (or that deconstruction is simply a way of breaking texts). I think, however, that the first twenty minutes of the film represent a kind of review of the principal archetypes. Once they have been assembled, without any concern for synthesis, then the story begins to suggest a sort of savage syntax of the archetypal elements and organizes them in multilevelled oppositions. Casablanca looks like a musical piece with an extraordinarily long overture where every theme is exhibited according to a monodic line. Only later the symphonic work takes place. In a way, the first twenty minutes could be analyzed by a Russian Formalist and the rest by a Greimasian. So, let me try just a sample analysis of the first part. I think that a real text-analytical work on Casablanca is still to be done. I merely offer here some hints to future researchers who will implement, some day, a complete reconstruction of its deep textual structure. First, African music, then, the Marseillaise. Two different genres are evoked: the adventure movie and the patriotic movie. Third genre: the newsreel. Over the image of the globe, the voice off suggests the news report. Fourth genre: the odyssey of the refugees. Fifth genre: Casablanca and Lisbon are, traditionally, high places of international intrigue. Thus, in two minutes, five genres are evoked at the same time. Casablanca-Lisbon. Passage to the Promised Land (Lisbon-America). Casablanca is the Magic Door. We still do not know what is the Magic Key and by which Magic Horse one can reach the Promised Land. "Wait, wait, wait." To make the passage one must submit to a Test. The Long Expectation. Purgatory. "Deutschland über alles." The German anthem introduces the theme of the Barbarians. The Kasbah. Pepe le Moko. Confusion, robberies, violence, and repression. Petain (Vichy) vs. the Cross of Lorena. See at the end the same opposition closing the story: Vichy water versus Joining the Resistance. War Propaganda movie. The Magic Key: the visa. It is around the winning of the Magic Key that passions are unleashed. Captain Renault is the Guardian of the Door or the boatman of the Acheron, to be conquered by a Magic Gift (money or sex). The Magic Horse: the airplane. The airplane flies over Rick's "Café Americain" recalling the Promised Land of which the Café is the reduced-scale model. Major Strasser shows up. Theme of the Barbarians and their emasculated slaves. "Je suis l'empire à la fin de la décadence / qui regarde passer les grands barbares blancs / en composant des acrostiques indolents. ..."

"Everybody comes to Rick's." By quoting the original play, Renault introduces the audience to the Café. The interior: the Foreign Legion (each character has a different nationality and a different story to tell - as well as his own skeleton in the closet), Grand Hotel (people come and people go, and nothing ever happens), the Mississippi River Boat, the New Orleans Brothel (with the black piano player), the Inferno of Gambling in Macao or Singapore (with Chinese women), the Smugglers' Paradise, the Last Outpost on the Edge of the Desert. Rick's place is a magic circle where everything can happen - love, death, pursuit, espionage, games of chance, seductions, music, patriotism. Limited resources and the unity of place, due to the theatrical origin of the story, suggested an admirable condensation of events in a single setting. One can identify the usual paraphernalia of at least ten exotic genres. Rick slowly shows up, first by a synecdoche (his hand), then by a metonymy (the check). The various aspects of the contradictory (plurifilmic) personality of Rick are introduced: the Fatal Adventurer, the Self-Made Businessman (money is money), the Tough Guy from a gangster movie, Our Man in Casablanca (international intrigue), the Cynic. Later he will also be characterized as the Hemingway Hero (he helped the Ethiopians and the Spaniards against fascism). He does not drink. This undoubtedly represents a nice problem, for later Rick must play the role of the Redeemed Drunkard, and he has to be made a drunk (as Disillusioned Lover) so that he can be redeemed. But the face of Bogey supports pretty well this unbearable amount of contradictory psychological features. The Magic Key itself: the transit letters. Rick receives them from Peter Lorre, and from this moment everybody wants them. How to avoid thinking of Sam Spade and of The Maltese Falcon? Music Hall. Mr. Ferrari. Change of genre: comedy with flippant dialogue. Rick is now the Disenchanted Lover, or the Cynical Seducer. Rick vs. Renault. The Charming Scoundrels. The theme of the Magic Horse and of the Promised Land returns. Roulette as the Game of Life and Death (Russian Roulette that devours fortunes and can destroy the happiness of the Bulgarian Couple, the Epiphany of Innocence). The Dirty Trick: cheating at cards. At this point

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the Trick is an Evil one, but later on it will be a Good one, providing a way to the Magic Key for the Bulgarian bride. Arrest and attempted escape of Ugarte. Action movie. Laszlo and Ilse. The Uncontaminated Hero and the Femme Fatale, both in white-always; clever opposition with the Germans, usually in black. In the meeting at Laszlo's table, Strasser is in white, in order to reduce the opposition. However, Strasser and Ilse are the Beauty and the Beast. The Norwegian agent: spy movie. The Desperate Lover. Drink to Forget. The Faithful Servant and his Beloved Master. Don Quijote and Sancho. Play it (again, Sam). Anticipated quotation of Woody Allen. The long flashback begins. Flashback as a content and flashback as a form. Quotation of the flashback as a topical stylistic device. The Power of Memory. The Last Time I Saw Paris. Two Weeks in Another City. Brief Encounter. French movies of the thirties (the station as Quai des Brumes). At this point the review of the archetypes is more or less complete. There is still the moment when Rick plays the Rough Diamond (who allows the Bulgarian bride to win) and two typical situations: the scene of the Marseillaise and the two lovers discovering that Love Is Forever. The gift to the Bulgarian bride (along with the enthusiasm of the waiters), the Marseillaise, and the Love Scene are three instances of the rhetorical figure of Climax, as the quintessence of Drama (each climax coming obviously with its own anti-climax). Now the story can elaborate upon its elements. The first symphonic elaboration comes with the second scene around the roulette. We discover for the first time that the Magic Key (which everybody believed to be affordable only by money) can in fact be given only as a Gift, a Gift that rewards Purity. The Donor will be Rick. He gives the money (free) to the Bulgarian couple, and he gives the visa (free) to Laszlo. Actually there is also a third Gift, the one Rick makes of his own desire, sacrificing himself. The receiver of this gift is the uncontaminated Laszlo, for (and please notice) there is no gift for Ilse, who in some sense, even though innocent, has betrayed two men. By becoming the Donor, Rick finds Redemption. No one impure can reach the Promised Land. But Rick and Renault redeem themselves and so can reach toward the other Promised Land-not America (which is Paradise), but the Resistance, the Holy War (which is a glorious Purgatory). Laszlo flies directly to Paradise because he has already undergone the Ordeal of clan-destiny. Moreover, Rick is not the only one to make a sacrifice: the idea of sacrifice pervades the whole story, from Ilse's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, to the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is prepared to give herself to help her husband, up to Victor's sacrifice when he is resigned to see Ilse with Rick in order to guarantee her safety. The second symphonic elaboration is upon the theme of the Unhappy Love. Unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilse and cannot have her. Unhappy for Ilse, who loves Rick and cannot live with him. Unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilse. The interplay of unhappy loves produces various twists and turns. In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse left him. Then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse is attracted to Rick, or when it happened for the first time. Finally, Ilse is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband. These unhappy loves are arranged in a triangle. But in the normal adulterous triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover, while in this case both men are betrayed and suffer a loss. In this defeat, however, an additional element plays a part, so subtly it almost escapes the level of consciousness. Quite subliminally, a hint of Platonic Love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted by the personality of Rick, and it seems that at a certain point each of the two plays out a duel of self-sacrifice to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's Confessions, the woman is an intermediary between the two men. She herself does not bear any positive value (except, obviously, Beauty): the whole story is a virile affair, a dance of seduction between Male Heroes. From now on the film implements the definitive construction of its inter-twined triangles, to end with the final resolution: the Supreme Sacrifice and the Redeemed Bad Guys. Notice that, if the redemption of Rick has been set up or foreshadowed quite early on, Renault's redemption is absolutely unjustified. It apparently comes only because this was the final requirement to meet, on the part of the movie, in order to be a perfect Epos of Frames.

### 30.2.4 The Archetypes Hold a Reunion

Casablanca is a cult movie precisely because all the archetypes are there, because each actor repeats a part played in other occasions, and because the characters live not the "real" life of

human beings, but a life as stereotypically portrayed by previous films. Casablanca rings with it the scent of *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* to such an extent that the spectator is ready to see in it also what happened after it. It is not until *To Have and Have Not* that Bogey played the role of the Hemingway hero, but here he appears "already" loaded with Hemingwayesque connotations for the simple diegetic detail that Rick fought in Spain. Peter Lorre trails behind him reminiscences of Fritz Lang; Conrad Veidt wraps his German officer in a faint perfume from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—he is not a ruthless technological Nazi, but a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar. Casablanca has succeeded in becoming a cult movie because it is not one movie. It is "the movies." And this is the reason it works, in spite of any aesthetic theory. For it stages the powers of Narrativity in its natural state, before art intervenes to tame it. This is why we accept that the characters change mood, morality, and psychology from one moment to the next, that conspirators cough to interrupt the conversation when a spy approaches, that bar girls weep at the sound of the Marseillaise. ... When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion. Just as extreme pain meets sensual pleasure, and extreme perversion borders on mystical energy, so does extreme banality allow us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime. Nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally. Nature has spoken here in place of men. If nothing else, this is a phenomenon worthy of veneration.

### 30.2.5 Cult Culture

The structure of *Casablanca* helps us to understand what happens in those movies that are born in order to become cult objects. What *Casablanca* does unconsciously, other movies will do with an extreme intertextual awareness - and with the expectation that the spectator be equally aware of their purposes. These are "postmodern" movies, where the quotation of the topos is recognized as the only way to cope with the burden of our encyclo-pedical filmic competence. Think, for instance, of *Bananas*, with its explicit quotation of the Odessa steps sequence from Eisenstein's *Potemkin*. In *Casablanca* one enjoys the quotation even though one does not recognize it, and those who do recognize it feel as belonging to the same clique. In *Bananas* those who do not catch the topos cannot enjoy the scene, while those who do simply feel smart. Another (and different) case is the quotation of the topical duel between the black Arab giant with his scimitar and the unprotected hero in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. If you remember, the topos suddenly turns into another one, as the unprotected hero is transformed, in a split second, into *The Fastest Gun in the West*. Here the naive viewer is allowed to miss the quotation, except that his or her enjoyment will then be pretty trivial; and the real enjoyment is reserved for the people accustomed to cult movies, who know the whole repertoire of "magic" archetypes. In a way, *Bananas* works for cultivated cinephiles and film buffs, while *Raiders* works for *Casablanca* addicts. The third case is the one of *E. T.*, when the alien is brought outside under a Halloween disguise and meets the dwarf from *The Empire Strikes Back*. You remember that *E.T.* is startled and then runs to greet him (or it). Here nobody can enjoy the scene if they do not share, at least, the following elements of intertextual competence:

1. they must know where the second character comes from (Spielberg citing Lucas),
2. they must know something about the relationship between the two directors,
3. they must know that both monsters have been designed by Rambaldi and that, consequently, they are linked by some form of brotherhood.

The required competence is not only inter-cinematic. It is inter-media, in the sense that the spectator must know not only other movies, but the whole of massmedia gossip about the movies. This third example presupposes a "Casa-blanca universe" in which cult has become the normal way of enjoying movies. Thus, in this case, we witness an instance of meta-cult, or of cult about cult—a cult culture. It would be semiotically uninteresting to look for quotations of archetypes in *Raiders* or in *Indiana Jones*: they were conceived within a meta-semiotic culture, and what the semiotician can find in them is exactly what the directors put there. Spielberg and Lucas are semiotically

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nourished authors working for a culture of instinctive semioticians. With Casablanca things go differently. So Casablanca explains Raiders, but Raiders does not explain Casablanca. At most it can explain the new ways in which Casablanca will be received in the next years. A day will come, and it will be a sad one, in which an overly smart, over-sophisticated audience will read Casablanca, as conceived by Michael Curtiz, after having read Calvino and Communications 4. That will be sad, but it will happen. Only in the course of this symposium have we been able to discover, for the last time, the Truth. Apres nous, le delug.

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct options:**

- (i) The film Casablanca was made on a very .....
  - (a) small budget
  - (b) big budget
  - (c) medium
  - (d) None of these
- (ii) Casablanca has genres of .....
  - (a) the adventure movie
  - (b) patriotic movie
  - (c) gangster movie
  - (d) All of these
- (iii) In this film two stars Humphrey Bogart and ..... have perfect chemistry.
  - (a) Ingrid Bergman
  - (b) Bogey
  - (c) Dejavu
  - (d) None of these

**30.3 Summary**

- Umberto Eco (1987) provides an interesting discussion of inter-textuality in his chapter 'Casablanca: Cult movies and intertextual collage'. Eco points out that the film Casablanca was made on a very small budget and in a very short time. As a result its creators were forced to improvise the plot, mixing a little of everything they knew worked in a movie as they went. The result is what Eco describes as an 'intertextual collage'. For Eco, Casablanca has been so successful because it is not, in fact, an instance of a single kind of film genre but a mixing of stereotyped situations that are drawn from a number of different kinds of film genres. As the film proceeds, he argues, we recognize the film genres that they recall. We also recognize the pleasures we have experienced when we have watched these kinds of films.
- A cult film, also commonly referred to as a cult classic, is a film that has acquired a cult following with a specific group of fans. Often, cult movies have failed to achieve fame outside small fanbases; however, there are exceptions that have managed to gain fame among mainstream audiences. Many cult movies have gone on to transcend their original cult status and have become recognized as classics.
- Cult films are often known to be eccentric, often do not follow traditional standards of mainstream cinema and usually explore topics not considered in any way mainstream-yet there are examples that are relatively normal. Many are often considered controversial because they step outside standard narrative and technical conventions.
- A cult film is a movie that attracts a devoted group of followers or obsessive fans, often despite having failed commercially on its initial release. The term also describes films that have remained popular over a long period of time amongst a small group of followers. Although they may only have a short cinema life, cult films often enjoy ongoing popularity through long runs on video, thus being issued in video "runs" with more copies than other movies. The movie Office Space (1999), which lost money during its box office run, managed to turn significant profits when word-of-mouth made it a popular video rental and purchase.

### 30.4 Key-Words

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1. Cultural materialism : Cultural materialism may be considered as the British version of new historicism. Both schools of criticism are characterized by newly theorized and politicized readings of history and literary texts. While new historicism is particularly concerned with the textuality of history, however, cultural materialism, influenced by Raymond Williams's version of Marxist criticism, focuses on the material conditions of the production and reception of literary texts. Cultural materialists are thus concerned to expose the ideological and political dimensions of such texts.

### 30.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss Casablanca as a cult movie.
2. Write a short note on Casablanca.
3. Explain the textual analysis of Casablanca.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                    (ii) (d)                    (iii) (a)

### 30.6 Further Readings



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## Unit 31: Umberto Eco's 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage' (Deconstructing and Disciplinarianising Hollywood)

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand Casablanca deconstructing.
- Discuss Casablanca as Cult Movies.

### Introduction

Casablanca is a 1942 American romantic drama film directed by Michael Curtiz, starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman and Paul Henreid, and featuring Claude Rains, Conrad Veidt, Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre and Dooley Wilson. Set during World War II, it focuses on a man torn between, in the words of one character, love and virtue. He must choose between his love for a woman and helping her Czech Resistance leader husband escape from the Vichy-controlled Moroccan city of Casablanca to continue his fight against the Nazis.

Although it was an A-list film, with established stars and first-rate writers-Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch received credit for the screenplay-no one involved with its production expected Casablanca to be anything out of the ordinary; it was just one of hundreds of pictures produced by Hollywood every year. The film was a solid, if unspectacular, success in its initial run, rushed into release to take advantage of the publicity from the Allied invasion of North Africa a few weeks earlier. Despite a changing assortment of screenwriters frantically adapting an unstaged play and barely keeping ahead of production, and Bogart attempting his first romantic leading role, Casablanca won three Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Its characters, dialogue, and music have become iconic, and the film has grown in popularity to the point that it now consistently ranks near the top of lists of the greatest films of all time.

### 31.1 Introductory Note

Umberto Eco (b.1932) was born in Allessandra, Italy, and studied at the University of Turin. He has taught at universities in Turin, Milan, Florence and Bologna, and is a frequent academic visitor to the United States. In 1981, he achieved international fame with his novel. *The Name of the Rose*, which was both a bestseller and a literary success. This has continued with *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988; trans 1989) and *Baudolino* (2000). Before that, he had established himself as an authority in the fields of semiotics, cultural studies and literary theory, which such publications as *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) [first published in Italy 1975], *The Role of the Reader: explorations in the semiotics*

of texts (1981) (1979), and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). His first full-length study of literary meaning was *Opera Aperta* ('Open Works' -1962) where he found the most rewarding works to involve fields of meaning rather than strings of mere lexical items, that is where the reader is actively co-opted to explore her/his own expectations and the responses when or if they are defeated. This perspective has developed to consider how we might limit interpretation, or, at least, establish where inconsistencies might lie; see his *The limits of Interpretation* (1990 [1990]) and his contributions to *interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (1992). pp.23-88. This has also branched out into the study of how we might identify the best translations: *Experiences in Translation* (2000) and *Mouse or Rat?: translation as negotiation* (2003).

Semiotics is the general science of signs, of which linguistics, according to Saussure is a subdivision. One consequence of this way of looking at language has been to encourage comparative study of literary and visual media, especially in the area of narrative. Another has been to break down the traditional prejudice of the custodians of 'high culture' against the products of popular or mass culture. These tendencies are exhibited very clearly in Eco's work, which is notable for its broad range of illustration and eclectic methodology. He is as interested in the semiotics of blue jeans or the Superman story as in the dense polysemy of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and this, combined with a lively, witty style, makes him one of the most accessible of critics in the structuralist tradition.

In 'Casablanca: cult movies and intertextual collage', he turns his attention on one of the popular classics of Hollywood cinema, reading off its multiple meaning in a manner reminiscent of Roland Barthes (see above, pp. 311-36). In the famous Humphrey Bogart-Ingrid Bergman movie. Eco suggests, filmic archetypes (or clichés, as a more elitist critic might call them) are multiplied to the point where they begin to 'talk among themselves' and generate an intoxicating excess of signification. This process, by which kitsch, in its reception by a finely attuned audience, can allegedly achieve something approximating the sublimity of classic art, is a recurrent theme and subject of controversy in discussions of postmodernism.

'Casablanca', first published in this form in 1984, is reprinted here from a collection of Eco's occasional and journalistic essays. *Faith in Fakes* (1986) (published in the United States and (as a paperback) in Britain under the title, *Travels in Hyperreality*)

Peter Bondanella, 'Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: from Structuralism to Semiotics', in Umberto Eco's *Alternative: the politics of culture and ambiguities of interpretation*, ed. Norma Bouchard and Veronica Pravadelli (1998), pp. 211-24 Peter Pericles Trifonas, Umberto Eco and *Football* (2001) Gary P. Radford, *On Eco* (2003)

## 31.2 Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage

### Cult

'Was that artillery fire, or is it my heart pounding?'<sup>1</sup> Whenever *Casablanca*<sup>2</sup> is shown, at this point the audience reacts with an enthusiasm usually reserved for football. Sometimes a single word is enough: fans cry every time Bogey says 'kid'. Frequently the spectators quote the best lines before the actors say them.

According to traditional standards in aesthetics, *Casablanca* is not a work of art, if such an expression still has a meaning. In any case, if the films of Dreyer, Eisenstein, or Antonioni are works of art, *Casablanca* represents a very modest aesthetic achievement. It is a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly, its characters are psychologically incredible, its actors act in a mannered way. Nevertheless, it is a great example of cinematic discourse, a palimpsest for future students of twentieth-century religiosity, a paramount laboratory for semiotic research into textual strategies. Moreover, it has become a cult movie.

- 1 Like the more famous line, 'Play it again, Sam' (actually 'Play it, Sam') this quotation is not quite accurate. Ingrid Bergman's words in the film are: 'Was that cannon fire, or is it my hear pounding?'
- 2 The action of *Casablanca* (made in 1942, directed by Michael Curtiz) takes place early in the Second World War, when Morocco was controlled by the Vichy French Government. The American Rick (Humphrey Bogart) runs a cafe-night club in Casablanca which is a place of passage for refugees trying to get exit visas to

## Notes

What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise. Naturally all these elements (Characters and episodes) must have some archetypal appeal, as we shall see. One can ask and answer questions about the various subway stations of New York or Paris only if these spots have become or have been assumed as mythical areas and such names as Canarsie line or Vincennes-Neuilly stand not only for physical places but become the catalyzers of collective memories.

Curiously enough, a book can also inspire a cult even though it is a great work of art: both *The Three Musketeers* and *The Divine Comedy* rank among the cult books; and there are more trivia games among the fans of Dante than among the fans of Dumas. I suspect that a cult movie, on the contrary, must display some organic imperfections. It seems that the boastful *Rio Bravo* is a cult movie and the great stagecoach is not.

I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. In the case of a book one can unhinge it, so to speak, physically, reducing it to a series of excerpts. A movie, on the contrary, must be already ramshackle, rickety, unhinged itself. A perfect movie, since it cannot be reread every time we want, from the point we choose, as happens with a book, remains in our memory as a whole, in the form of a central idea or emotion; only an unhinged movie survives as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs. It should display not one central idea but many. It should not reveal a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on, and because of, its glorious ricketiness.

However, it must have some quality. Let me say that it can be ramshackle from the production point of view (in that nobody knew exactly what was going to be done next)—as happened evidently with the Rocky Horror Picture Show—but it must display certain textual features, in the sense that, outside the conscious control of its creators, it becomes a sort of textual syllabus, a living example of living textuality. Its addressee must suspect it is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intention of their authors. A cult movie is the proof that, as literature comes from literature, cinema comes from cinema.

Which elements, in a movie, can be separated from the whole<sup>3</sup> and adored for themselves? In order to go on with this analysis of *Casablanca* I should use some important semiotic categories, such as the ones (provided by the Russian Formalists)<sup>4</sup> of theme and motif. I confess I find it very difficult to ascertain what the various Russian Formalists meant by motif. If—as Veselovsky says—a motif is the simplest narrative unit, then one wonders why ‘first from heaven’ should belong to the same category as ‘the persecuted maid’ (since the former can be represented by an image, while the latter requires a certain narrative development). It would be interesting to follow

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the United States, usually by bribing the Prefect of Police, Renault. A Czech Resistance leader, Victor Laszlo, turns up with his wife, Ilse (Ingrid Bergman), who had a love affair with Rick in Paris just before the German Occupation, when she believed her husband to be dead. On discovering that he was alive, she parted from Rick without explanation. Bitterly hurt by this experience, Rick is at first hostile to Ilse in *Casablanca*, but on learning the truth, and that she still loves him, chivalrously helps her and Laszlo to escape the clutches of the Gestapo chief Strasser, at considerable risk to himself. In the final sequence, Rick and the implausibly reformed Renault go off to join the Free French.

3 With the widespread availability of DVDs, Eco's point is capable of greater emphasis: our identification with the episode or intertextual motif is expedited by the technical facility of the instant re-run, sometimes cutting across any imposed editorial order or theme.

4 A reference to what were in effect two Russian groupings that flourished in the pre-and immediately post-revolutionary years, the Moscow Linguistic Circle, which included Roman Jakobson (see introductory note to essay, p.140 above), and the Opoyaz group based in St Petersburg, including Viktor Shklovsky. Motifs were particularly memorable and ‘defamiliarized’ symbols to be considered aside from their position within narrative frameworks or ‘themes’.

Tomashevsky and to look in *Casablanca* for free or tied and for dynamic or static motifs. We should distinguish between more or less universal narrative functions à la Propp,<sup>5</sup> visual stereotypes like the cynic Adventurer, and more complex archetypal situations like the Unhappy Love. I hope someone will do this job, but here I will assume, more prudently (and borrowing the concept from research into Artificial intelligence) the more flexible notion of 'frame'.

In *The Role of the Reader* I distinguished between common and intertextual frames. I meant by 'common frame' data-structures for representing stereotyped situations such as dining at a restaurant or going to the railway station; in other words, a sequence of actions more or less coded by our normal experience. Any by 'intertextual frames' I meant stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual tradition and recorded by our encyclopedia, such as, for example, the standard duel between the sheriff and the bad guy or the narrative situation in which the hero fights the villain and wins, or more macroscopic textual situation, such as the story of the vierge souillée [dishonoured virgin] or the classic recognition scene (Bakhtin considered it a motif, in the sense of a chronotope)<sup>6</sup>. We could distinguish between stereotyped intertextual frames (for instance, the Drunkard Redeemed by Love) and stereotyped iconographical units (for instance, the Evil Nazi). But since even these iconographical units, when they appear in a movie, if they do not directly elicit in action, at least suggest its possible development, we can use the notion of inter-textual frame to cover both.

Moreover, we are interested in finding those frames that not only are recognizable by the audience as belonging to a sort of ancestral intertextual tradition but that also display a particular fascination. 'A suspect who eludes a passport control and is shot by the police' is undoubtedly an intertextual frame but it does not have a 'magic' flavor. Let me define as 'magic' flavor. Let me address intuitively the idea of 'magic' frame. Let me define as 'magic' those frames that, when they appear in a movie and can be separated from the whole, transform this movie into a cult object. In *Casablanca* we find more intertextual frames than 'magic' intertextual frames. I will call the latter 'intertextual archetypes'.

The term 'archetype' does not claim to have any particular psychoanalytic or mythic connotation,<sup>7</sup> but serves only to indicate a pre-established and frequently reappearing narrative situation, cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts and provoking in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déjà vu,<sup>8</sup> that everybody yearns to see again. I would not say that an intertextual archetype is necessarily 'universal'. It can belong to a rather recent textual tradition, as with certain topoi of slapstick comedy. It is sufficient to consider it as a topos or standard situation that manages to be particularly appealing to a given cultural area or a historical period.

## The Making of Casablanca

'Can I tell you a story?' Ilse asks. Then she adds: 'I don't know the finish yet.' Rick says: 'Well, go on, tell it. Maybe one will come to you as you go along.' Rick's line is a sort of epitome of *Casablanca* itself. According to Ingrid Bergman seems so fascinatingly mysterious because she did not know at which man she was to look with greater tenderness.

She explains why, in the story, she does not, in fact, choose her fate: she is chosen. When you don't know how to deal with a story, you put stereotyped situations in it because you know that they, at least, have already worked elsewhere. Let us take a marginal but revealing example. Each time Laszlo orders something to drink (and it happens four times) he changes his choice: (1) Cointreau, (2) cocktail, (3) cognac, and (4) whisky (he once drinks champagne but he does not ask for it). Why such confusing and confused drinking habits for a man endowed with an ascetic

5. Vladimir Propp. *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)

6. Chronotope is a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin (see pp 235-63, above) to analyse the ways in which time and space are represented and related in narrative.

7. As it does in the work of Carl Jung and critics influenced by him, such as Maud Bodkin and Northrop Frye. (see sections 14,15 and 31 of 20th century Literary Criticism.)

8. Something already seen.

Notes

temper? There is no psychological reason. My guess is that each time Curtiz was simply quoting, unconsciously, similar situations in other movies and trying to provide a reasonably complete repetition of them.

Thus one is tempted to read *Casablanca* as T.S. Eliot read *Hamlet*, attributing its fascination not to the fact that it was a successful work (actually he considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate efforts) but to the imperfection of its composition. He viewed *Hamlet* as the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier versions of the story, and so the puzzling ambiguity of the main character was due to the author's difficulty in putting together different topoi. So both public and critics find Hamlet beautiful because it is interesting, but believe it is interesting because it is beautiful.

On a smaller scale the same thing happened to *Casablanca*. Forced to improvise a plot, the authors mixed a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire that had stood the test of time. When only a few of these formulas are used, the result is simply kitsch. But when the repertoire of stock formulas is used, the result is simply kitsch. But when the repertoire is used wholesale, then the result is an architecture like Gaudi's Sagrada Familia:<sup>9</sup> the same vertigo, the same stroke of genius.

### Stop by Stop

Every story involves one or more archetypes. To make a good story a single archetype is usually enough. But *Casablanca* is not satisfied with that, it uses them all.

It would be nice to identify our archetypes scene by scene and short by shot, stopping the tape at every relevant step. Every time I have scanned *Casablanca* with very cooperative research groups, the review has taken many hours. Furthermore, when a team starts this kind of game, the instance of stopping the videotape increase proportionally with the size of the audience. Each member of the team sees something that the others have missed, and many of them start to find in the movie even memories of movies made after *Casablanca* - evidently the normal situation for a cult movie, suggesting that perhaps the best deconstructive readings should be made of unhinged texts (or that deconstruction is simply a way of breaking up texts).

However, I think that the first twenty minutes of the film represent a sort of review of the principal archetypes. Once they have been assembled, without any synthetic concern, then the story starts to suggest a sort of savage syntax of the archetypal elements and organizes them in multileveled oppositions. *Casablanca* looks like a musical piece with an extraordinarily long overture, where every theme is exhibited according to a monodic line. Only later does the symphonic work take place. In a way the first twenty minutes could be analyzed by a Russian Formalist and the rest by a Greimasian.<sup>10</sup>

Let me then try only a sample analysis of the first part. I think that a real text analytical study of *Casablanca* is still to be made, and I offer only some hints to future teams of researchers, who will carry out, someday, a complete reconstruction of its deep textual structure.

1. First, African music, then the Marseillaise. Two different genres are evoked: adventure movie and patriotic movie.
2. Third genre. The globe: Newsreel. The voice even suggests the news report. Fourth genre: the odyssey of refugees. Fifth genre: *Casablanca* and Lisbon are, traditionally, *hauts lieux* [favourite places] for international intrigues. Thus in two minutes five genres are evoked.
3. *Casablanca*-Lisbon. Passage to the Promised Land (Lisbon-America). *Casablanca* is the Magic Door. We still do not know what the Magic key is or by which Magic Horse one can reach the Promised Land.
4. 'Wait, wait, wait.' To make the passage one must submit to a Test. The Long Expectation. Purgatory situation.

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9 Antonio Gaudi (1852-1926), Spanish art nouveau architect best known for his (still uncompleted) Church of the Holy Family in Barcelona.

10 See note 4, p 441, above



5. 'Deutschland tiber Alles.' The German anthem introduces the theme of Barbarians.
6. The Casbah. Pépé le Moko. Confusion, robberies, violence, and repression.
7. Pétain (Vichy) vs. the cross of Lorraine. See at the end the same opposition closing the story: Eau de Vichy vs. Choice of the Resistance. War Propaganda movie.
8. The Magic Key: the visa. It is around the winning of the Magic Key that passions are unleashed. Captain Renault mentioned: he is the Guardian of the Door, or the boatman of the Acheron to be conquered by a Magic Gift (money or sex).
9. The Magic Horse: the airplane. The airplane flies over Rick's Café American, thus recalling the Promised Land of which the Café is the reduced model.
10. Major Strasser shows up. Theme of the Barbarians, and their emasculated slaves. 'Jesuis l'empire à la fin de la décadence/Qui regarde passed les grands barbares blancs/En composant des acrostiques indolents...' <sup>11</sup>
11. 'Everybody comes to Rick's.' By quoting the original play, <sup>12</sup> Renault introduces the audience to the Café. The interior: Foreign Legion (each character has a different nationality and a different story to tell, and also his own skeleton in the closet), Grand Hotel (people come and people go, and nothing ever happens), Mississippi River Boat, New Orleans Brothel (black piano player), the Gambling inferno in Macao or Singapore (with Chinese women), the Smugglers' Paradise, the Last outpost on the Edge of the Desert. Rick's place is a magic circle where everything can happen-love, death, pursuit, espionage, games of chance, seductions, music, patriotism. Limited resources and the unity of place, due to the theatrical origin of the story, suggested an admirable condensation of events in a single setting. One can identify the usual paraphernalia of at least ten exotic genres.
12. Rick slowly shows up, first by synecdoche (his hand), then by metonymy (the check) <sup>13</sup>. The various aspects of the contradictory (plurifilmic) personality of Rick are introduced: the Fatal Adventurer, the Self-Made Businessman (money is money), the Tough Guy from a gangster movie, our Man in Casablanca (international intrigue), the Cynic. Only later he will be characterized also as the Hemingwayan Hero (he helped the Ethiopians and the Spaniards against fascism). He does not drink. This undoubtedly represents a nice problem, for later Rick must play the role of the Redeemed Drunkard and he has to be made a drunkard (as a Disillusioned Lover) so that he can be redeemed. But Bogey's face sustains rather will this unbearable number of contradictory psychological features.
13. The Magic Key, in person: the transit letters. Rick receives them from Peter Lorre and from this moment everybody wants them: how to avoid thinking of Sam Spade and of The Maltese Falcon? <sup>14</sup>
14. Music Hall. Mr. Ferrari. Change of genre: comedy with brilliant dialogue. Rick is now the Disenchanted Lover, or the Cynical Seducer.
15. Rick vs. Renault. The Charming Scoundrels.
16. The theme of the Magic Horse and the Promised Land returns.
17. Roulette as the Game of Life and Death (Russian Roulette that devours fortunes and can destroy the happiness of the Bulgarian Couple, The Epiphany of Innocence). The Dirty Trick: cheating at cards. At this point the Trick is an Evil one but later it will be a Good one, providing a way to the Magic Key for the Bulgarian bride.
18. Arrest and tentative escape of Ugarte. Action movie.

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11. 'I an the empire at the end of its decline/Watching the great white barbarians pass/While composing idle acrostics' 11. 1-3 of Paul Verlaine's 'Languer'. one of his poems ' A la manière de plusieurs' in the collection, Jadis et Naguere (1884).

12. Casablanca was based on an unproduced stage play entitled. Everybody Comes of Rick's.

13. See not 1, p. 165, above.

14. Another Hollywood classic, made in 1934, also starring. Humphrey Bogart and Peter Lorre.

Notes

19. Laszlo and Ilse. The Uncontaminated Hero and La Femme Fatale. Both in white always; clever opposition with Germans, usually in black. In the meeting at Laszlo's table, Strasser is in white, in order to reduce the opposition. However, Strasser and Ilse are Beauty and the Beast. The Norwegian agent: spy movie.
20. The Desperate lover and Drink to Forget.
21. The Faithful Servant and his Beloved Master. Don Quixote and Sancho.
22. Play it (again, Sam). Anticipated quotation of Woody Allen.<sup>15</sup>
23. The long flashback begins. Flashback as a content and flashback as a form. Quotation of the flashback as a topical stylistic device. The Power of Memory. Last Day in Paris. Two weeks in Another Town. Brief Encounter. French movie of the 1930's (the station as quai des brumes).<sup>16</sup>
24. At this point the review of the archetypes is more or less complete. There is still the moment when Rick plays the Diamond in the Rough (who allows the Bulgarian bride to win)<sup>17</sup>, and two typical situations: the scene of the Marseillaise and the two lovers discovering that Love is Forever. The gift to the Bulgarian bride (along with the enthusiasm of the waiters), the Marseillaise, and the Love Scene are three instances of the rhetorical figure of Climax, as the quintessence of Drama (each climax coming obviously with its own anticlimax).

Now the story can elaborate upon its elements.

The first symphonic elaboration comes with the second scene around the roulette table. We discover for the first time that the Magic Key (that everybody believed to be only purchasable with money) can in reality be given only as a Gift, a reward for Purity. The Donor will be Rick. He gives (free) the visa to Laszlo. In reality there is also a third Gift, the Gift Rick makes of his own desire, sacrificing himself. Note that there is no gift for Ilse, who in some way, even though innocent, has betrayed two men. The Receiver of the Gift is the Uncontaminated Laszlo. By becoming the Donor, Rick meets Redemption. No one impure can reach the Promised Land. But Rick and Renault redeem themselves and can reach the other Promised Land, not America (which is Paradise) but the Resistance, the Holy War (which is glorious Purgatory). Laszlo flies directly to Paradise because he has already suffered the ordeal of the underground. Rick, moreover, is not only one who accepts sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice pervades the whole story, Ilse's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is prepared to give herself to help her husband, Victor's sacrifice when he is prepared to see Ilse with Rick to guarantee her safety.

The second symphonic elaboration is upon the theme of the Unhappy Love. Unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilse and cannot have her. Unhappy for Ilse, who loves Rick and cannot leave with him. Unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilse. The interplay of unhappy loves produces numerous twists and turns. In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse leaves him. Then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse is attracted to Rick. Finally Ilse is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband.

These unhappy loves are arranged in a triangle. But in the normal adulterous triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover, while in this case both men are betrayed and suffer a loss.

In this defeat, however, an additional element plays a part, so subtly that it almost escapes the level of consciousness. Quite subliminally a hint of Platonic Love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted by the personality of Rick, and it seems that at a certain point each of the two is playing out the duel of sacrifice to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's Confessions, the woman is her an intermediary between the two men. She herself does

15. Play It Again, Sam is the title of a film made by Woody Allen in 1972, about a neurotic film critic obsessed with Humphrey Bogart.
16. Literally, 'quay (or railway platform) of fogs', this was the title of a classic French film, directed by Marcel Carné in 1938.
17. To be precise, Rick ensures that her husband wins at the roulette table, thus ensuring that the couple can buy their exit visas from Renault for cash, instead of the girl having to sleep with the police chief to obtain them.

not bear any positive value (except, obviously, beauty). The whole story is a virile affair, a dance of seduction between Male Heroes.

From now on the film carries out the definitive construction of its intertwined triangles, to end with the solution of the Supreme Sacrifice and of the Redeemed Bad Guys. Note that, while the redemption of Rick has long been prepared, the redemption of Renault is absolutely unjustified and comes only because this was the final requirement the movie had to meet in order to be a perfect Epos of Frames.

### **The Archetypes Hold a Reunion**

Casablanca is a cult movie precisely because all the archetypes are there, because each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, and because human beings live not 'real' life but life as stereotypically portrayed in previous films: Casablanca carries the sense of déjà vu to such a degree that the addressee is ready to see in it what happened after it as well. It is not until To have and Have and Have not that Bogey plays the role of Hemingway hero, but here he appears 'already' loaded with Hemingwayesque connotations simply because Rick fought in Spain. Peter Lorre trails reminiscences of Fritz Lang, Conrad Veidt's German Officer emanates a faint whiff of The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. He is not ruthless, technological Nazi; he is a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar.

Casablanca became a cult movie because it is not one movie. It is 'movies'. And this is the reason it works, in defiance of any aesthetic theory.

For it stages the powers of Narrativity in its natural state, before art intervenes to tame it. This is why we accept the way that characters change mood, morality, and psychology from one moment to the next, that conspirators cough to interrupt the conversation when from one moment to the next, that conspirators cough to interrupt the conversation when a spy is approaching that bar girls cry at the sound of the Marseillaise....

When all the archetypes burst out shamelessly, we plumb Homeric profundity. Two cliches make us laugh but a hundred cliches move us because we sense dimly that the cliches are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion.

Just as the extreme of pain meets sensual pleasure, and the extreme of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too the extreme of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime.

Nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally. Nature has spoken in place of men. This, along, is a phenomenon worthy of veneration.

### **The Charged Cult**

The structure of Casablanca helps us understand what happens in later movies born in order to become cult objects.

What Casablanca does unconsciously, other movies will do with extreme intertextual awareness, assuming also that the addressee is equally aware of their purposes. These are 'postmodern' movies, where the quotation of the topos is recognized as the only way to cope with the burden of our filmic encyclopedic expertise.

Think for instance of Bananas,<sup>18</sup> with its explicit quotation of the Odessa steps from Eisenstein's Potemkin. In Casablanca one enjoys quotation even though one does not recognize it, and those who recognize it feel as if they all belonged to the same little clique. In Bananas those who do not catch the topos cannot enjoy the scene and those who do simply feel smart.

Another (and different) case is the quotation of the topical duel between the black Arab giant with his scimitar and the unprotected hero, in Raiders of the Lost Ark. If you remember, the topos suddenly turns into another one, and the unprotected hero becomes in a second. The Fastest Gun in the West. Here the ingenuous viewer can miss the quotation though his enjoyment will then be rather slight; and real enjoyment is reserved for the people accustomed to cult movies, who know the whole repertoire of 'magic' archetypes. In a way, Bananas works for cultivated 'cinephiles' while Raiders works for Casablanca-addicts.

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<sup>18</sup> Film made by Woody Allen in 1971

Notes

The third case is that of E.T., when the alien is brought outside in a Halloween disguise and meets the dwarf coming from The Empire Strikes Back. You remember that E.T. starts and runs to cheer him (or it). Here nobody can enjoy the scene if he does not share, at least, the following elements of intertextual competence:

1. He must know where the second character comes from (Spielberg citing Lucas),<sup>19</sup>
2. He must know something about the links between the two directors, and
3. He must know that both monsters have been designed by Rambaldi and that, consequently, they are linked by some form of brotherhood.

The required expertise is not only intercinematic, it is intermedia, in the sense that the addressee must know not only other movies but all the mass media gossip about movies. This third example presupposes a 'Casablanca universe' in which cult has become the normal way of enjoying movies. Thus in this case we witness an instance of metacult, or of cult about cult - a Cult Culture.

It would be semiotically uninteresting to look for quotations of archetypes in Raiders or in Indiana Jones: they were conceived within a metasemiotic culture, and what the semiotician can find in them is exactly what the directors put there. Spielberg and Lucas are semiotically nourished authors working for a culture of instinctive semioticians.

With Casablanca the situation is different. So Casablanca explains Raiders, but Raiders does not explain Casablanca. At most it can explain the new ways in which Casablanca will be received in the next years.

It will be a sad day when a too smart audience will read Casablanca as conceived by Michael Curtiz after having read Calvino <sup>20</sup> and Barthes. But that day will come. Perhaps we have been able to discover here, for the last time, the Truth.

Après nous, le déluge.<sup>21</sup>

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct option:**

- (i) Casablanca is an American ..... .
  - (a) Michael Curtiz
  - (b) Humphrey Bogard
  - (c) Ingrid Bergman
  - (d) None of these
- (ii) Casablanca first published essay in ..... .
  - (a) 1984
  - (b) 1981
  - (c) 1983
  - (d) 1990
- (iii) Deutschland tiber Alles is the theme of ..... .
  - (a) wise
  - (b) love
  - (c) Barbarians
  - (d) None of these.

**31.3 Summary**

- Umberto Eco (b.1932) was born in Allessandra, Italy, and studied at the University of Turin. He has taught at universities in Turin, Milan, Florence and Bologna, and is a frequent academic visitor to the United States. In 1981, he achieved international fame with his novel. The Name of the Rose, which was both a bestseller and a literary success.
- In 'Casablanca: cult movies and intertextual collage', he turns his attention on one of the popular classics of Hollywood cinema, reading off its multiple meaning in a manner

19. ET was made by Stephen Spielberg: the Empire Strikes Back by George Lucas.

20. Italo Calvino (1923-86). Italian experimental novelist.

21. After us, the deluge' -Proverbial expression variously attributed to Madame la Pompadour and Louis XV of France.

reminiscent of Roland Barthes (see above, pp. 311-36). In the famous Humphrey Bogart-Ingrid Bergman movie. Eco suggests, filmic archetypes (or clichés, as a more elitist critic might call them) are multiplied to the point where they begin to 'talk among themselves' and generate an intoxicating excess of signification. This process, by which kitsch, in its reception by a finely attuned audience, can allegedly achieve something approximating the sublimity of classic art, is a recurrent theme and subject of controversy in discussions of postmodernism.

- 'Casablanca', first published in this form in 1984, is reprinted here from a collection of Eco's occasional and journalistic essays. *Faith in Fakes* (1986) (published in the United States and (as a paperback) in Britain under the title, *Travels in Hyperreality*)
- Casablanca is a cult movie precisely because all the archetypes are there, because each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, and because human beings live not 'real' life but life as stereotypically portrayed in previous films: Casablanca carries the sense of déjà vu to such a degree that the addressee is ready to see in it what happened after it as well. It is not until *To Have and Have Not* that Bogey plays the role of Hemingway hero, but here he appears 'already' loaded with Hemingwayesque connotations simply because Rick fought in Spain. Peter Lorre trails reminiscences of Fritz Lang, Conrad Veidt's German Officer emanates a faint whiff of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. He is not ruthless, technological Nazi; he is a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar.

### 31.4 Key-Words

1. Intentional fallacy : A term coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to the fact that texts are constituted by a 'tissue of citations', that every word of every text refers to other texts and so on, limitlessly. Often used in an imprecise or weak sense to talk about echoes or allusions.

### 31.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss Deconstructing and disciplinarianising Hollywood.
2. Give an intertextual analysis of Casablanca.
3. Critically examine Casablanca, as Cult Movies.

### Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (i) (a)                      (ii) (a)                      (iii) (c)

### 31.6 Further Readings



Books

1. Hutcheon, Linda A *Poetics of postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Kennedy, X.J., Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*, 1st edition, New Delhi: Pearson, 2007.
3. Lodge, David (ed.) *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, London: Longman, 1972.
4. Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh (eds.) *A Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edition, London: Arnold, 1999.
5. Sethuraman, V.S. and Ramaswamy (eds.) *The English Critical Tradition, Volume II*, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1977.
6. Seturaman, V.S. (ed.) *Contemporary Criticism: An Anthology*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2008.



## Unit 32: Umberto Eco's 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage' (Intertextual Analysis)

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### Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Umberto Eco's Casablanca.
- Analyse Casablanca's intertextual history.

### Introduction

In Casablanca the world is a movie set (with a few newsreel cutaways) and America is shown as the universal refuge -- or at least Hollywood is. Humphrey Bogart and Dooley Wilson are just about the only Americans in the cast (another version of Huck and Jim). The rest are all foreigners -- Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains, Sydney Greenstreet -- lucky to be spending the war in Culver City. Most of these were even actual refugees from fascism -- Paul Henreid, Peter Lorre, Marcel Dalio, S.Z. Sakall, Curt Bois, and, of course, Conrad Veidt as the villainous Nazi, playing out his own version of From Caligari to Hitler by climaxing a career that began with the role of Cesare the Somnambulist.

That Lorre, Sakall, and director Michael Curtiz were all born in Hungary can't, of itself, account for the movie's popularity in that country where, I'm told, it is traditionally telecast on New Year's Eve. This casbah is universal. If any Hollywood movie exemplifies the "genius of the system," it is surely Casablanca -- a film whose success was founded on almost as many types of skill as varieties of luck. (It's ironic that aspiring screenwriters take Casablanca's script as a text; rewritten many times, the film was virtually made up as its makers went along.) Mixing genres with wild abandon, Casablanca became a cult film precisely because as Umberto Eco put it, "it is not one movie. It is movies." All Hollywood movies that is, with a soupçon of the French cinema of the late '30's. In other words, Casablanca was the culture of the West, everything we were fighting for in World War II, brought together in one neat package.

It is because Casablanca is "movies" that it continues to haunt Hollywood. The film was replicated throughout the '40s and into the Cold War -- reaching its nadir with the 1951 Hong Kong in which Ronald Reagan (once, according to a Warner Bros. press release, a candidate for the original cast) plays the cynical American adventurer with the secret heart of gold. Ten years later, Casablanca

was enshrined in revival houses across America as a sacred relic, not to mention an audience-participation precursor of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. (Like *Casablanca*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a compendium of mass media cliché and romantic wisdom -- in this case pertaining to post-Elvis Anglo-American youth culture.) If *Casablanca* itself was the *Casablanca* of 1961 (call this now designated cult film "*Casablanca*"), the next decade was, of course, a problematic one for Americans abroad: You might argue Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* as the *CASABLANCA* of 1971, if not for Woody Allen's half-nerdy, half-swinging refetishization of "*CASABLANCA*," *Play it Again, Sam*.

Perhaps each generation gets the *CASABLANCA* remake it deserves. Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) -- which, in a self-conscious attempt to be "movies," knowingly reshuffled elements of *CASABLANCA* and "*CASABLANCA*" -- heralded America's reborn confidence and self-absorption. Sidney Pollack's quickly-forgotten *Havana* (1990) -- which proposed Robert Redford as the cynical expatriate and Lena Olin as the Swedish dame of mystery, transporting *CASABLANCA* to the Pearl of the Antilles on the eve of the Castro revolution -- is redolent of our current confusion and decline.

### 32.1 Intertextual Analysis

When people in their fifties sit down before their television sets for a rerun of *Casablanca*, it is an ordinary matter of nostalgia. However, when the film is shown in American universities, the boys and girls greet each scene and canonical line of dialogue ("Round up the usual suspects," "Was that cannon fire, or is it my heart pounding?" -- or even every time that Bogey says "kid") with ovations usually reserved for football games. And I have seen the youthful audience in an Italian art cinema react in the same way. What then is the fascination of *Casablanca*?

The question is a legitimate one, for aesthetically speaking (or by any strict critical standards) *Casablanca* is a very mediocre film. It is a comic strip, a hotch-potch, low on psychological credibility, and with little continuity in its dramatic effects. And we know the reason for this: The film was made up as the shooting went along, and it was not until the last moment that the director and script writer knew whether Ilse would leave with Victor or with Rick. So all those moments of inspired direction that wring bursts of applause for their unexpected boldness actually represent decisions taken out of desperation. What then accounts for the success of this chain of accidents, a film that even today, seen for a second, third, or fourth time, draws forth the applause reserved for the operatic aria we love to hear repeated, or the enthusiasm we accord to an exciting discovery? There is a cast of formidable hams. But that is not enough.

Here are the romantic lovers -- he bitter, she tender -- but both have been seen to better advantage. And *Casablanca* is not *Stagecoach*, another film periodically revived. *Stagecoach* is a masterpiece in every respect. Every element is in its proper place, the characters are consistent from one moment to the next, and the plot (this too is important) comes from Maupassant--at least the first part of it. And so? So one is tempted to read *Casablanca* the way T. S. Eliot reread *Hamlet*. He attributed its fascination not to its being a successful work (actually he considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate plays) but to something quite the opposite: *Hamlet* was the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier *Hamlets*, one in which the theme was revenge (with madness as only a stratagem), and another whose theme was the crisis brought on by the mother's sin, with the consequent discrepancy between *Hamlet's* nervous excitation and the vagueness and implausibility of *Gertrude's* crime. So critics and public alike find *Hamlet* beautiful because it is interesting, and believe it to be interesting because it is beautiful.

On a smaller scale, the same thing happened to *Casablanca*. Forced to improvise a plot, the authors mixed in a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire of the tried and true. When the choice of the tried and true is limited, the result is a trite or mass-produced film, or simply kitsch. But when the tried and true repertoire is used wholesale, the result is an architecture like Gaudi's *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona. There is a sense of dizziness, a stroke of brilliance.

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But now let us forget how the film was made and see what it has to show us. It opens in a place already magical in itself -- Morocco, the Exotic -- and begins with a hint of Arab music that fades into "La Marseillaise." Then as we enter Rick's Place we hear Gershwin. Africa France, America. At once a tangle of Eternal Archetypes comes into play. These are situations that have presided over stories throughout the ages. But usually to make a good story a single archetypal situation is enough. More than enough. Unhappy Love, for example, or Flight. But *Casablanca* is not satisfied with that: It uses them all. The city is the setting for a Passage, the passage to the Promised Land (or a Northwest Passage if you like). But to make the passage one must submit to a test, the Wait ("they wait and wait and wait," says the off-screen voice at the beginning). The passage from the waiting room to the Promised Land requires a Magic Key, the visa. It is around the winning of this Key that passions are unleashed. Money (which appears at various points, usually in the form of the Fatal Game, roulette) would seem to be the means for obtaining the Key. But eventually we discover that the Key can be obtained only through a Gift -- the gift of the visa, but also the gift Rick makes of his Desire by sacrificing himself. For this is also the story of a round of Desires, only two of which are satisfied: that of Victor Laszlo, the purest of heroes, and that of the Bulgarian couple. All those whose passions are impure fail.

Thus, we have another archetype: the Triumph of Purity. The impure do not reach the Promised Land; we lose sight of them before that. But they do achieve purity through sacrifice -- and this means Redemption. Rick is redeemed and so is the French police captain. We come to realize that underneath it all there are two Promised Lands: One is America (though for many it is a false goal), and the other is the Resistance -- the Holy War. That is where Victor has come from, and that is where Rick and the captain are going, to join de Gaulle. And if the recurring symbol of the airplane seems every so often to emphasize the flight to America, the Cross of Lorraine, which appears only once, anticipates the other symbolic gesture of the captain, when at the end he throws away the bottle of Vichy water as the plane is leaving. On the other hand the myth of sacrifice runs through the whole film: Ilse's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is ready to yield herself to help her husband, Victor's sacrifice when he is prepared to let Ilse go with Rick so long as she is saved.

Into this orgy of sacrificial archetypes (accompanied by the Faithful Servant theme in the relationship of Bogey and the black man Dooley Wilson) is inserted the theme of Unhappy Love: unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilse and cannot have her; unhappy for Ilse, who loves Rick and cannot leave with him; unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilse. The interplay of unhappy loves produces various twists and turns: In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse leaves him; then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse is attracted to Rick; finally Ilse is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband. These three unhappy (or Impossible) loves take the form of a Triangle. But in the archetypal love-triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover. Here instead both men are betrayed and suffer a loss, but, in this defeat (and over and above it) an additional element plays a part, so subtly that one is hardly aware of it. It is that, quite subliminally, a hint of male or Socratic love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted to Rick, and it almost seems at a certain point as if each of the two were playing out the duel of sacrifice in order to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the woman places herself as Intermediary between the two men. She herself is not a bearer of positive values; only the men are.

Against the background of these intertwined ambiguities, the characters are stock figures, either all good or all bad. Victor plays a double role, as an agent of ambiguity in the love story, and an agent of clarity in the political intrigue -- he is Beauty against the Nazi Beast. This theme of Civilization against Barbarism becomes entangled with the others, and to the melancholy of an Odyssean Return is added the warlike daring of an Iliad on open ground.

Surrounding this dance of eternal myths, we see the historical myths, or rather the myths of the movies, duly served up again. Bogart himself embodies at least three: the Ambiguous Adventurer, compounded of cynicism and generosity; the Lovelorn Ascetic; and at the same time the Redeemed

Drunkard (he has to be made a drunkard so that all of a sudden he can be redeemed, while he was already an ascetic, disappointed in love). Ingrid Bergman is the Enigmatic Woman, or *Femme Fatale*. Then such myths as: *They're Playing Our Song*; *the Last Day in Paris*; *America, Africa, Lisbon as a Free Port*; and *the Border Station or Last Outpost on the Edge of the Desert*. There is the *Foreign Legion* (each character has a different nationality and a different story to tell), and finally there is the *Grand Hotel* (people coming and going). *Rick's Place* is a magic circle where everything can (and does) happen: love, death, pursuit, espionage, games of chance, seductions, music, patriotism. (The theatrical origin of the plot, and its poverty of means, led to an admirable condensation of events in a single setting.) This place is Hong Kong, Macao, *l'Enfer du Jeu*, an anticipation of Lisbon, and even *Showboat*.

But precisely because all the archetypes are here, precisely because *Casablanca* cites countless other films, and each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, the resonance of intertextuality plays upon the spectator. *Casablanca* brings with it, like a trail of perfume, other situations that the viewer brings to bear on it quite readily, taking them without realizing it from films that only appeared later, such as *To Have and Have Not*, where Bogart actually plays a Hemingway hero, while here in *Casablanca* he already attracts Hemingwayesque connotations by the simple fact that Rick, so we are told, fought in Spain (and, like Malraux, helped the Chinese Revolution). Peter Lorre drags in reminiscences of Fritz Lang; Conrad Veidt envelops his German officer in a faint aroma of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* -- he is not a ruthless, technological Nazi, but a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar.

Thus *Casablanca* is not just one film. It is many films, an anthology. Made haphazardly, it probably made itself, if not actually against the will of its authors and actors, then at least beyond their control. And this is the reason it works, in spite of aesthetic theories and theories of film making. For in it there unfolds with almost telluric force the power of Narrative in its natural state, without Art intervening to discipline it. And so we can accept it when characters change mood, morality, and psychology from one moment to the next, when conspirators cough to interrupt the conversation if a spy is approaching, when whores weep at the sound of "*La Marseillaise*." When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion. Just as the height of pain may encounter sensual pleasure, and the height of perversion border on mystical energy, so too the height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime. Something has spoken in place of the director. If nothing else, it is a phenomenon worthy of awe.

Film writers often express bewilderment when faced with *Casablanca's* enduring appeal or, more specifically, with their own slightly embarrassed affection for the old Warner Brothers relic. "Some undefinable quality in *Casablanca* seems to make it better with each viewing," write Don Whitemore and Philip Alan Cecchetti in their essay on Michael Curtiz, the prolific director of *Casablanca*, while Harvey Greenberg calls his essay on the film "*If It's So Schmaltzy, Why Am I Weeping?*" In his famous gloss on the film, Andrew Sarris throws up his hands and calls it an "accident," singling out the work of "lightly likable" Curtiz as "the most decisive exception" to his auteur theory. Richard Schickel is probably not alone in declaring *Casablanca* to be his favorite film, even though acknowledging its limitations as "a somewhat better-than-average example of what the American studio system could do when it was at its most stable and powerful."

Even the film's cult status is problematic. *Casablanca* reached the full flowering of its culthood only in the 1960s when Harvard students regularly attended Humphrey Bogart film festivals during finals week. More than a decade before *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Casablanca* initiates would shout "*The Germans wore gray; you wore blue*" and "*Is that cannon fire, or is it my heart pounding?*" along with the projected images of Rick (Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). *Casablanca* needed twenty years to become a cult item, perhaps because it did not take the usual route to that status. The film's success within the industry -- it won the 1943 Academy Award for best picture -- was helped in no small part by the Allied invasion of North Africa, which preceded the film's initial release by a few days, and the meeting of Roosevelt and Churchill in *Casablanca*, which took place during the film's national release. Later, more "conventional" cult films like

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Rocky Horror, Pink Flamingos, and Eraserhead had much less auspicious beginnings. How can a popular wartime melodrama, promoted initially as home-front propaganda, continue to find such devoted audiences?

For Umberto Eco, the key to Casablanca is its "glorious incoherence," producing enough contradictory material to support new meanings for each new audience. Not only does Casablanca contain several archetypal situations, writes Eco:

"When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion."

If Eco had watched more products of the American studio system, he might have observed that, from the beginning, Hollywood films have constituted a never-ending reunion of archetypes. We suspect that the film's appeal has more to do with its ability to tap into the unconscious concerns that regularly drive audiences to the movies. Psychoanalytic theory provides the royal road to understanding the American cinema, especially the films of the "classical" period that began with the acceptance of sound films around 1930 and culminated at about the time that Casablanca was made in 1942. But since psychoanalysis has in the last two decades ceased to be a monolithic method for film scholars, we have adopted a pluralist approach, deploying a range of psychoanalytically based methodologies around Casablanca. We share the view that "a psychoanalytic reflection on any phenomenon is incisive to the extent that it employs more than one dimension." The "star" performances of Bogart and Bergman, the music of Max Steiner, the romantic tensions of the narrative, even the film's handling of American politics can be approached through psychoanalytic thought. We are as interested in illustrating the heterogeneity of psychoanalytic film theory as we are in offering a thorough reading of Casablanca.

### 32.2 Oedipus in North Africa

A wealth of Oedipal material awaits anyone wishing to interpret the film along classical Freudian lines. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, Rick Blaine is an outcast from his home country. At least in the fantasies of Capt. Renault, Rick may have fled because he killed a man. In fact, as Greenberg has observed, Renault's speculations have a great deal of Oedipal resonance. Because Rick will not divulge the real reasons that brought him to Casablanca, Renault wonders if Rick absconded with the sacred money of the church or if he ran off with a senator's wife. Renault says that the romantic in him would like to believe that Rick took a man's life. Rick's response that he left America because of a combination of all three can be read as more than a glib piece of verbal sparring. Greenberg suggests that the sacrosanct stolen treasure [is] the wife of a preeminent older man; her husband is the one murdered -- and by the love thief. Thus, the essence of the "combination" of offenses is the child's original desire to kill his father and possess his mother. In Casablanca's one flashback, Rick's Parisian interlude with Ilsa can be understood as the realization of this desire to possess: the blissful union with an all-good, nurturing woman completely unattached (at least in Rick's mind) to a threatening paternal figure.

We doubt that any other actress could have fulfilled this role quite as completely as Bergman, whose screen image projects the most desirable qualities of mother and lover. Whenever Curtiz's camera closes tightly on her face, she appears to be as innocent and nurturing as she is sensual and compliant. Rick was not the only one who responded to Bergman's face in this manner: The American media worked itself into a frenzy in 1949 when Bergman bore a child out of wedlock to Roberto Rossellini, after years of being portrayed in the press as the ideal wife and mother, Bergman so thoroughly flouted American mythology that she was denounced on the floor of the U.S. Senate, and a legislator in the Maryland state senate introduced a bill to condemn Stromboli, Bergman's first film with Rossellini.

Rick's flashback at first depicts a dream-like paradise of prewar, pre-Oedipal Paris, where he toasts Ilsa amid romantic settings. The lovers create a dyed that comes to its inevitable end with the arrival of Nazi armies, a nightmare image of the jealous, castrating father. Ilsa, as nurturing mother, has even warned Rick that the Nazis will take special pains to look for him. Later on, in



Casablanca, Rick enters a more advanced stage of Oedipal development when he comes face to face with Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid). Although some viewers may consider Henreid's Laszlo something of a cold fish, there is no question that the intellectual/freedom-fighter manages to be more heroic, virtuous, understanding, and forgiving than the most idealized hero of romantic fiction. Laszlo's entrance presents Rick with a typical conflict of the Oedipal-phase male child. Does he challenge and attempt to replace his rival, or does he renounce the forbidden object of his love and identify with his father?

Unlike Oedipus, whose entire, undisplaced story has never really been taken up by Hollywood, Rick negotiates the Oedipal phase with success. He renounces his incestuous object of desire and identifies with father/Laszlo, Ilsa's original mate whose place Rick could usurp only temporarily. When he guns down the evil Nazi Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt), Rick kiss the principal enemy of his father surrogate, thereby becoming a man himself. Alternately, we might also regard the killing of Strasser as the displacement of Rick's Oedipal rage onto a less stigmatizing individual, but one who is nevertheless associated with the pre-Oedipal disruption brought about when the Nazis entered Paris. Like Ernest Jones's Hamlet, Rick is an indecisive, passive individual until he renounces mother, identifies with father, and kiss the villain. In terms of the film's political/Oedipal nexus, Rick's decision to fight the Nazis corresponds with his realization that the paradise he has lost was an illusion sustained only by a refusal to acknowledge the existence of father. Casablanca resembles most Hollywood films of the classical period in its highly involving combination of myth and politics with melodrama.

Another aspect of Rick's dilemma is that the man he wishes to replace is a figure of unimpeachable integrity and virtue, thus complicating his efforts to integrate his positive regard for Laszlo with his murderous wishes toward him. Similarly, it is difficult for Rick to view this forgiving and saintly leader of the resistance as a castrating, punitive father who will retaliate against Rick for his lustful yearning toward Ilsa. Because of Rick's difficulty in integrating these representations of himself and Laszlo, he appears to regress from the task of integration that accompanies the Oedipal phase. The result is a splitting of the father figure into the benevolent Laszlo on the one hand and the sadistic Major Strasser on the other. Even the ultimate identification with Laszlo at the end of the film comes at the expense of his murdering the disavowed and split-off "bad" aspects of the internalized father. One could argue, then, that resolution of the Oedipal conflict is only partial since a true integration of "good" and "bad" aspects of the father has not been achieved.

### **32.3 "Here's Looking. . ."**

These classically psychoanalytic readings of Casablanca are not typical of the theoretically oriented writing that currently fills most academic film journals. By isolating the characters as case histories, this application of Freudian theory casts the viewer in the role of ideal analyst, completely free from any countertransference reaction to the images on the screen. As Shoshana Felman has observed, the actual experience of text puts the reader/viewer in the dual position of analyst and analysand, attempting to take charge of the story at the same time that the story takes charge of its consumer. The Lacanian- inflected psychoanalysis that has dominated film theory in the academy for several years now is usually presented as the alternative to a classically Freudian film criticism. Too often in the lacananalysis of films, however, will-of-the-wisp theoretical positions are read back into films with such iron rigidity that some of the most salient aspects of a film are entirely overlooked. As Kaplan argues, we must hold applied psychoanalysis to the same conceptual standards as clinical psychoanalysis. Most notably, Lacanians tend to ignore the specificity of actors: Bogart and Bergman, for example, are almost texts unto themselves, and any thorough reading of Casablanca must account for how their star qualities, their histories, and the meanings encoded in their cinematic images transform the films in which they appear. We undertake a Lacanian reading of Casablanca to illustrate one of several possibilities in the application of psychoanalysis to the Hollywood cinema.

A major similarity between lacananalysis and classical psychoanalysis is an attention to Oedipal triangles. Raymond Bellour, especially eminent among Lacanian theorists, has suggested that the

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Oedipus story is the masterplot of all Hollywood narratives. A Lacanian reading of *Casablanca* would focus not so much on the dynamics among the characters but on how the viewer is constructed within a larger discursive field that positions the viewer in a circuit of looks.

Richard Corliss has suggested that "Rick's famous toast--'Here's looking at you, kid'--can be read as meaning, 'Here's trying to look into your soul, kid, to figure out who you really are.'" A Lacanian would have no difficulty conceptualizing the remark somewhat differently, in terms of how the viewer is positioned through Rick, its surrogate. So long as the audience is in control of the gaze, looking at Ilsa but also at everyone else, it need not acknowledge the range of differences that the classical realist text works so hard to conceal. The possibility that someone or something may be looking at Rick raises the possibility of difference and the possibilities of castration that marks the entry of the subject into the symbolic register. As long as the viewer controls the look, it can safely remain in the imaginary register where there is no difference between itself and mother.

Significantly, when Rick's looking toast is interrupted in the flashback by Gestapo loudspeakers, Sam (Dooley Wilson) warns him that the Germans will soon be in Paris, "and they'll come lookin' for ye." The invading Nazis represent not only the castrating father but the castrating gaze of the Other as well. The coincidence of the Nazis' arrival with the baffling disappearance of Ilsa leaves Rick as an object in someone else's plot, his previously omniscient gaze reduced to a limited point of view. Similarly, the Oedipal trajectory that leads Rick to the reconciliation with Laszlo and the elimination of Strasser restores him to a sense of origin and identity offered by the father. Rick surrenders Ilsa to Laszlo only after he has completely regained control over the narrative, writing a script to which he holds the only copy. As a result, he has regained the right to utter the looking toast once again. His newly found father, unjealous and supportive to a fault, then tells him, "This time I know our side will win."

### **32.4 ". . . at You, Kid"**

Beginning in 1975 with the publication of Laura Mulvey's extraordinarily influential essay, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," Lacan's theses on the look and castration have been central to feminist film theory. According to Mulvey and the many writers who have followed in her wake, the patriarchal order of the Hollywood cinema provides two basic solutions to the fear activated in men by women's implied threat of castration: Either the woman's lack is part of her punishment for some wrongdoing, usually sexual transgression, or she is fetishized so that a portion of her body (breasts, hair, face, legs, bottom, even the entire body) becomes important enough to compensate for the lack of a penis. Male viewers can then derive voyeuristic pleasure from a cinema that provides fetishized images of women to exorcise male castration anxiety. The most commonly cited example here is Busby Berkeley, who directed all those production numbers of Warner Brothers musicals in which entire armies of women are fetishized, their body parts reduced to geometric patterns.

The plot of *Casablanca* consistently emphasizes the sufferings of Ilsa, carefully placing the burden of transgression on her more than on the two male leads. Both Rick and Laszlo have loved her unselfishly, but she has been unfaithful to both. Although the film finds narrative means for repressing her guilt, justifying her conduct in terms of a legitimate romantic dilemma, there is no question that she has deceived Laszlo through her silences as much as she has deceived Rick by concealing her marriage to Laszlo. As Greenberg has observed, there is little sense in the Laszlos' decision to keep their marriage a secret in order to protect Ilsa from the Gestapo. It would be just as logical for the Germans to interrogate a lover as a wife, perhaps even more logical. Ilsa has no real justification for not telling Rick of her marriage, just as she has no sound reason for concealing her affair with Rick from the infinitely forgiving Laszlo.

Significantly, Ilsa's sins are those of omission rather than commission, resulting from the absence of voice rather than from too much. Kaja Silverman has extended Mulvey's work on the role of women in the visual register of the cinema to a study of woman's cinematic voice. Classical cinema does not stop at confining women to an inferior function in which a male-driven diegesis stops so

that the woman may be exhibited. In addition, the voice of a woman is seldom given the powerful position of voice-over narration. With rare and problematic exceptions such as Hitchcock's Rebecca, extradiegetic voiceover is inevitably male in Hollywood films, including Casablanca with its voice-of-god newsreel voice in the prologue. The subordination of women in patriarchal cinema has even been extended to situations in which heroines are quite literally deprived of voice, the most often cited example being Johnny Belinda. Appropriately, at the end of Casablanca, Ilsa has very little to say to either Rick or Laszlo, her lying silences giving way to a continuing renunciation of voice after the crucial love scene "up a flight" in which she asks Rick to do the thinking--and speaking--for both of them.

The film's sadistic treatment of Ilsa takes a substantial toll in tears, often revealed in tight closeups of her fetishized face. The almost kittenish sexuality of Ingrid Bergman's face, combined with her country-girl wholesomeness, provides the male viewer with an object of aesthetic perfection sufficient to ward off the thought of castration. Significantly, the first Mt. Rushmore closeup of Bergman in Casablanca takes place as she listens, lost in thought, to Sam playing "As Time Goes By." Mulvey points out that musicals are typical of the patriarchal order of classical cinema in their careful separation of performance numbers--often featuring scantily clad females--from the diegesis so that the viewer can divert all his attention to contemplating the female body. There is always a risk in interrupting the diegesis, however, because the involving flow of the story effectively stops. Mulvey mentions the "buddy movie," in which the eroticized display of women is entirely eliminated, as one solution to this problem. The long closeup of Bergman's face as she listens to the music is perhaps an even better solution, integrating a moment of fetishized display into a diegetic sequence that prepares us for the climactic reunion of Rick and Ilsa.

### **32.5 "Moonlight and Love Songs Never Out of Date"**

Until recently, little work had been done on the importance of background music in classical cinema. Claudia Gorbman is one of a handful of critics who have productively brought psychoanalytic theories of music into film study. She cites a number of Lacanian writers who have associated music with a pre-Oedipal stage in which the child lives in a "sonorous envelope" dominated by the pleasingly rhythmic sound of the mother's heart, and later by the soothing, musical sound of her voice. By promoting "benign regression" to the blissful time before the child senses that it is separate from the mother, movie music "invokes the (auditory) imaginary." Furthermore, music is free from linguistic signification and other kinds of representation, and thus it can more easily bypass defense systems and penetrate to the unconscious. Gorbman accepts the arguments of Metz and others that dominant cinema attempts to erase the signs of its workings by casting the viewer as the subject rather than the object of the film's enunciation. "Music greases the wheels of cinematic pleasure by easing the spectator's passage into subjectivity."

Although she does not dwell on Casablanca, Gorbman devotes an entire chapter to the work of Max Steiner, the prolific composer who scored Casablanca, in order to illustrate "classical Hollywood practice." After establishing a set of principles for the use of music in Hollywood films (invisibility, "inaudibility," signifier of emotion, narrative cuing, continuity, unity, and the legitimate violation of any principle at the service of another), Gorbman undertakes a discussion of "the epic feeling" of music that is especially relevant to the appeal of Casablanca. Remarking on the anthropological analysis of musical elements in rituals that bind together human communities, she notes how music in classical cinema can be put to use for the pleasurable creation of the sense of commonality. The most obvious example of this phenomenon occurs diegetically in Casablanca when Laszlo leads the non-German patrons of Rick's Cafe Americain in a performance of "La Marseillaise," eliciting patriotic tears even from the sexually collaborationist Yvonne (Madeleine Le Beau). The extradiegetic music in Casablanca is carefully constructed to elicit appropriate emotions from the audience, usually the same emotions that the film attributes to Rick. The most striking example is the string orchestra voicing of "As Time Goes By" that is superimposed on Sam's diegetic piano after Rick insists on hearing the song. Steiner's music intrudes "inaudibly" at this crucial moment in order to seal us into Rick's -- and the film's--imaginary, the pre-Oedipal scenes in Paris before the arrival of the Germans and the departure of Ilsa.

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Citing an example from Steiner's score for Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, Gorbman has written, "the appropriate music will elevate the story of a man to the story of Man." Much the same can be said for the long closeup of Bergman as she listens to "As Time Goes By." With Ilsa's face providing additional validation, Sam's interpretation of the lyrics elevates a love song to a song about Love. Surprisingly, the song was almost excised from the film. "As Time Goes By" was written by Herman Hupfeld and first performed in 1931 in a Broadway show called *Everybody's Welcome*. The song is central in the unproduced play on which the script for *Casablanca* is based. When shooting was completed and an edited print of the film was presented to Steiner, he objected to the use of "As Time Goes By" and asked to substitute a song of his own composition. Steiner said that he disliked the song, but he also knew that he would surely benefit from the royalty checks if his own song became popular. At first, producer Hal Wallis consented to cut the scene in which Bergman requests "As Time Goes By" by name and to shoot additional scenes in which Steiner's song would be used. But since Ingrid Bergman had by this time received a rather severe haircut for her role in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Wallis realized that a new scene with Bergman and Wilson was out of the question. Steiner subsequently learned that he would have to work with the original scene and hence with "As Time Goes By."

It is as difficult to imagine *Casablanca* without "As Time Goes By" as it is to imagine the film with Ronald Reagan, Ann Sheridan, and Dennis Morgan, the leads who were originally projected for the film. In its day, the film gained an element of nostalgic power by using a well-known song. Many in the audience may have associated a romantic experience of their own with the music, thus adding an additional level of audience subjectivity to Ilsa's, and later Rick's, reaction to the song. For a moment, Ilsa and the viewer return to an earlier time, but the audience has the larger-than-life face of an idealized maternal figure to facilitate regression to a moment even more pleasant than the one recalled by the heroine. Although more contemporary audiences are likely to associate the song with the same era as the film, the music is still crucial in associating the experience of the film with a simpler, more romantic era to which the viewer can blissfully return.

## 32.6 America Dreaming

Psychoanalytic thought is relevant to *Casablanca*'s political agenda as well as to the film's expression of American ideology. We are most concerned here with the extent to which the "dream work" of the film censors or displaces political material that may be intrinsic to American mythology but incompatible with the war effort. Michael Wood was one of the first critics to observe that Rick is portrayed as a patriot ultimately dedicated to fighting the Nazis even though he represents a well-established breed of American heroes, who are more suspicious of compromising entanglements with friends than with the predictable hostility of enemies. According to Wood, the well-known poster of Bogart as Rick, "staring into the middle distance, a giant of heroic self-pity in his eyes . . . is a picture of what isolation looks like at its best: proud, bitter, mournful, and tremendously attractive." When Rick hands over Ilsa to Laszlo, he tells her, "where I'm going, you can't follow," and yet if Rick and Laszlo now share the same cause, why is it suddenly so essential that she follow Laszlo and not Rick?

In *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, Robert B. Ray categorizes *Casablanca* as "the most typical" American film. Ray uses *Casablanca* as a tutor text for what he calls the "formal paradigm" of Classical Hollywood as well as the "thematic paradigm" that addresses the conflict between isolationism and communitarian participation. Thematically, the film is typical in its appropriation of an official hero (Laszlo), who stands for the civilizing values of home and community, and an outlaw hero (Rick), who stands for ad hoc individualism. Although these mythological types at first appear to be at odds, they share a common purpose by the end, just as they do in films as generically dissimilar as *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *Shane*, and *Star Wars*.

Formally, *Casablanca* abundantly illustrates the importance of a number of "centering" techniques that create the illusion of realism while at the same time disguising the complex apparatus that lies behind each shot. Although Ray does little to develop a Lacanian reading of *Casablanca*, he relies upon the Lacanian-inflected writings of the Screen critics to develop his thesis of the formal



paradigm. Ray, however, is less interested in castration and the gaze than he is in adapting psychoanalytic thought to a theory of how "the concealment of the necessity for choice" determines the sequence of shots in classical cinema. By pinning the viewer's consciousness to Rick's, most of what happens takes its logic from his point of view. The fusion of Rick and audience begins when we first catch a glimpse of nothing more than Rick's hand as it signs a check. Ray observes that the shot is striking because the hand comes directly out of our space, as if a (right-handed) viewer were to reach up to the screen and sign the check himself. Shortly after this shot, the entire body of Rick emerges from the viewer's space as he walks into the frame to confront the arrogant German who tries to force his way into Rick's inner sanctum.

Earlier, the personal magnetism of Rick seems to exert an inexorable pull on the camera. After being told that "everyone comes to Rick's" and having seen the sign with his name above the cafe door, the viewer enters the cafe and is drawn steadily toward Rick as the camera drifts always to the left in a series of tracking shots. The camera pauses first to close in slightly on Sam, allowing him to be centered against a background that loses a bit of the definition that deepfocus cinematography usually grants to establishing shots in this and most other classical Hollywood films. The tracking shots eventually arrive at Rick's table where he is engaged in a solitary game of chess. The audience is then granted its first good look at Bogart's face, a visage that Casablanca cultists have called "existential." Ray points out that this concealing of the necessity for choice also governs the thematic paradigm in Casablanca. The film invites the audience to identify with Rick rather than Laszlo even though official American wartime sentiments are consistently voiced by Laszlo. Rick regularly insists upon unmediated self-interest ("I stick my neck out for nobody," "I'm the only cause I'm interested in"), a position that Ferrari (Sidney Greenstreet) explicitly identifies with a discredited American tradition: "My dear Rick, when will you realize that in this world today isolationism is no longer a practical policy?" [emphasis added]. Casablanca is typical of classical Hollywood in its willingness to confront, at least initially, its audience's most important concerns, in this case, "the deep-seated, instinctive anxiety that America's unencumbered autonomy could not survive the global commitments required by another world war." Although the film never puts Rick in a position to retract his innately American reluctance to give up his independence, he ultimately does exactly what Laszlo--and the United States government--would have him do. Of course, Rick's decision to fight the Nazis is related to his feelings for Ilsa rather than a change of heart about being an isolationist. By means of this well-established Hollywood pattern of reconciliation, Casablanca could support the war effort without disturbing the foundations of American myth.

Ray acknowledges a debt to an essay by Charles Eckert on the 1937 gangster melodrama *Marked Woman*. Eckert argues that the corrupt, conspicuously affluent movie gangsters of 1930s Hollywood provided Depression-era audiences with ideologically sanctioned objects for the hatred they felt toward the rich. Although Eckert uses Marxist and Levi-Straussian methodologies to uncover the class conflict and myth-making that is submerged in *Marked Woman*, he is also interested in how Freudian concepts of the dream work can explain the process by which politically proscribed class hatred is displaced into familiar conventions of melodrama. We should also mention Brian Henderson's work on John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) that reveals how the film's dialectic on the assimilation of Indians is also a displacement for American concerns about black integration in the months just after the "separate but equal doctrine" was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1954. Although Eckert and Henderson have both cautioned against reductive readings that ignore the overdetermined polysemy of Hollywood films, they have both acknowledged the importance of psychoanalysis in their larger semiotic project.

Casablanca's audience must never be asked to choose between Rick and Laszlo because everything in the film has prepared them to choose Rick, who represents the rejection of America's involvement in world politics. Instead, the film relieves the audience of the necessity of choice by displacing the film's political conflict into melodrama, where familiar emotions overwhelm ideas. To the extent that films resemble dreams, the film's latent political content--whether or not America should enter the war--appears in the manifest content as whether or not Rick should help Laszlo. Although



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Victor Laszlo is always in Rick's shadow, he stands for the values of the father and the prevailing American belief in 1942 that freedom is worth fighting and dying for. By censoring the theme of American reluctance to give up its autonomy, the film spares the audience the agony of siding against the values of the father, condensing the Oedipal resolution to another shared experience between Rick and the viewer.

What Makes a Cult Film? Once a cult is established, it can often sustain itself by means of its own inertia. After becoming a camp item in the 1960s, Casablanca attained the status of a classic by an alternative system of canon- building. Usually, a work of art finds its validation in the academy. Even though popular film is currently an accepted subject of university study, films like Casablanca need not establish their importance by impressing faculty committees as masterpieces. Although it existed briefly as a television series during the 1955-56 season, Casablanca did not become a fetish object until the Rick/ Bogie poster became popular and Woody Allen subsequently wrote the play (and movie) Play It Again, Sam. During the weeks in which this paper was written, allusions to the film have twice appeared in popular TV shows: a full-dress, five-minute parody of Casablanca was the dream of Bert Viola (Curtis Armstrong) in an episode of Moonlighting; and on Miami Vice, a lovable crook attempted to corrupt Detective Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) by telling him that a suitcase full of contraband was their "letters of transit," but Crockett replied, "this is not the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Now that it has been canonized, Casablanca is sure to continue as a universal signifier of romantic love, doing the right thing, and painful sacrifice. As for the qualities that made Casablanca a cult film and have made its appeal "never out of date," we can point to all the psychologically resonant aspects of the film discussed in this paper. Probably the most crucial ingredients in the film's success are (1) the star presence of Bogie and Bergman; (2) the subliminal but nostalgically potent music, both diegetic and extradiegetic; (3) the satisfyingly resolved Oedipal material; and (4) the reassuring message that the American outlaw hero (and by extension, all Americans) can be true to his instincts even in a world war. This last message may seem specific to the 1943 audience, but movies have been quite successful in keeping old myths alive, and when reconfigured for the Era of Reagan and Bush, these myths can be more vital than ever. Star Wars was the first in a cycle of "disguised Westerns" that has achieved extraordinary popularity by reviving the outlaw hero/official hero plot. Since then, Beverly Hills Cop I and II, Top Gun, Rambo III, and Lethal Weapon I and II have recycled the same basic myth with enormous success. As for the audience today, Casablanca has an extra level of appeal, offering a sense of control to repeat viewers. Just as "As Time Goes By" eased the 1943 viewer into a nostalgic imaginary, the film itself now grants the viewer benign regression to a lost moment when right and wrong were clear cut and going off to war could be a deeply romantic gesture.

**Self-Assessment**

**1. Choose the correct option:**

- (i) Ingard Bergman is the ..... .
  - (a) kind woman
  - (b) wise woman
  - (c) enigmatic woman
  - (d) None of these
- (ii) Casablance was made is ..... .
  - (a) 1942
  - (b) 1940
  - (c) 1943
  - (d) 1941

**32.7 Summary**

- If any Hollywood movie exemplifies the 'genius of the system,' it is surely Casablanca - a film whose success was founded on almost as many types of skill as varieties of luck. (It's also ironic that aspiring screenwriters take Casablanca's script as a text; rewritten many times, the film was virtually made up as its makers went along.) Mixing genres with wild abandon, Casablanca has become a cult film precisely because, as Umberto Eco suggests, 'it is not one movie. It is movies.'" More than this, Casablanca is the bedrock of western

mythology, a film that unapologetically plays with the very myths and beliefs that fuel our own Western society - the very world we live in. Umberto Eco is quite cheeky, but unreservedly astute about the role Casablanca has played in our own understanding of the world, and the reason why it has reached the heights of legend...

- ...[Casablanca] opens in a place already magical in itself - Morocco, the Exotic - and begins with a hint of Arab music that fades into "La Marseillaise." Then as we enter Rick's Place we hear Gershwin. Africa, France, America. At once a tangle of Eternal Archetypes comes into play. These are situations that have presided over stories throughout the ages. But usually to make a good story a single archetypal situation is enough. More than enough. Unhappy Love, for example, or Flight. But Casablanca is not satisfied with that: It uses them all. The city is the setting for a Passage, the passage to the Promised Land. But to make the passage one must submit to a test, the Wait ("they wait and wait and wait," says the off-screen voice at the beginning). The passage from the waiting room to the Promised Land requires a Magic Key, the visa. It is around the winning of this Key that passions are unleashed. Money (which appears at various points, usually in the form of the Fatal Game, roulette) would seem to be the means for obtaining the Key. But eventually we discover that the Key can be obtained only through a Gift - the gift of the visa, but also the gift Rick makes of his Desire by sacrificing himself. For this is also the story of a round of Desires, only two of which are satisfied: that of Victor Laszlo, the purest of heroes, and that of the Bulgarian couple. All those whose passions are impure fail.
- Thus, we have another archetype: the Triumph of Purity. The impure do not reach the Promised Land; we lose sight of them before that. But they do achieve purity through sacrifice - and this means Redemption. Rick is redeemed and so is the French police captain. We come to realise that underneath it all there are two Promised Lands: One is America (though for many it is a false goal), and the other is the Resistance - the Holy War. That is where Victor has come from, and that is where Rick and the captain are going. On the other hand the myth of sacrifice runs through the whole film: Ilsa's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is ready to yield herself to help her husband, Victor's sacrifice when he is prepared to let Ilsa go with Rick so long as she is saved.
- Into this orgy of sacrificial archetypes (accompanied by the Faithful Servant theme in the relationship of Bogey and the black man Dooley Wilson) is inserted the theme of Unhappy Love: unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilsa and cannot have her; unhappy for Ilsa, who loves Rick and cannot leave with him; unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilsa. The interplay of unhappy loves produces various twists and turns: In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilsa leaves him; then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilsa is attracted to Rick; finally Ilsa is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband. These three unhappy (or Impossible) loves take the form of a Triangle. But in the archetypal love-triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover. Here instead both men are betrayed and suffer a loss, but, in this defeat an additional element plays a part, so subtly that one is hardly aware of it. It is that, quite subliminally, a hint of male or Socratic love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted to Rick, and it almost seems at a certain point as if each of the two were playing out the duel of sacrifice in order to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's Confessions, the woman places herself as Intermediary between the two men. She herself is not a bearer of positive values; only the men are.
- But precisely because all the archetypes are here, precisely because Casablanca cites countless other films, and each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, the resonance of intertextuality plays upon the spectator. Casablanca brings with it, like a trail of perfume, other situations that the viewer brings to bear on it quite readily"

Notes

### 32.8 Key-Words

1. Simulacrum : (L. 'to make like') in the postmodernism of Jean Baudrillard the simulacrum is defined in terms of the substitution of the sign of the real for the real itself, in terms of a copy without origin.
2. Sjuzhet : (Russian 'plot') term used by the Russian formalist critics and borrowed by certain narratologists to denote the way in which a story is told, its 'discourse' or telling, as opposed to the events of the narrative, the fabula or story.

### 32.9 Review Questions

1. Write a brief analysis of Umberto Eco Casablanca.
2. Is Casablanca a Cult movie? Discuss.

#### **Answers: Self-Assessment**

1. (i) (c) (ii) (a)

### 32.10 Further Readings



*Books*

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