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12-B Status from UGC

Literary Criticism

MAENCC202

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LITERARY CRITICISM
(MAENCC202)

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EDITION	:	2024 (Restricted Circulation)
PUBLISHED BY	:	Teerthanker Mahaveer University, Moradabad

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Unit 1: Aristotle: The Poetics— Introduction to the Author and the Text

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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 form 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.

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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 carrer 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

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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 Lyceius, 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.

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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—communistic. 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 contended 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

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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 undergoing 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,

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

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,

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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 telegrphic 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 disgressions, 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 leading 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.

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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 genuis 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 psycological 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.

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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 form 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

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

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 form 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 form 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 form 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 form 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 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.

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Self-Assessment

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 exhuberance.
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

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 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*."

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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, sculputre. 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 *objcets* 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.

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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 be 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 wore 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 'Iambs' 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 is 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 from;
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

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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 psychical 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*.

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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

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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 (*perepeteia*) 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.

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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. *Prologue*
2. *Episode*
3. *Exode*
4. *Choric Song divided into*
   (*i*) *Parode* (*ii*) *Stasimon*, and (*iii*) *Commos*.

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 odius. 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 face 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*.

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

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, in 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.

   It 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.

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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 by 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

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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 mechancial 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.

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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 of 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, "sovran", 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

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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.

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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 as 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.

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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, (*iv*) 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)

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- 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 or 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.

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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 discribe 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.

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"Purgation" Theories

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 alopathic 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."

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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

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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 spacators, 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 plesure 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, end **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 immorals who sin consciously. He has Hamartia and as a result his very virtues hurry him to his ruin.

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3.3 Hamartia

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 Biblehamartia 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.

Notes 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.Bradely) has been the subject of much debate. Aristotle, as writer of the Poetics, has 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 Rostangni 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

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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 form:

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

The error of judgement is derived form 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 is 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 a 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. Macniele 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

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(*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 conflations 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. Peripateia ("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

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 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.

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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

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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.

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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 genuis 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

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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-preted 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.

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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 arrousing 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 arrousing 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.

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- 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-aspiring 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

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.

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

CONTENTS

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.

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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.

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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 disjuncture 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

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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.
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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 asreader 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 makesmeaning in a text rather than a passive function which derivesmeaning 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

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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" .

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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 intentionally 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 overriden 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 he disputed issues in contemporary literary theory. I am not saying that for some readers or hearers the question would be wholly unintelligible

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(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 ca 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 riot appear).

Nevertheless, there is a distinction to he 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 deo 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 he 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

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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 he 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. 0f 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 he 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 havc 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

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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 somi 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 construings, 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 call 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.

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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 Meyesr 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

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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. Glose 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.
4. Bloom, Harold et. al, Deconstruction and Criticism. London: Routledge, 1979.
5. Handy, William and Max Westbook, (eds,) Twentieth Century Criticism, New York: Free Press, Macmillan, 1977.

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Unit 7: Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences-Jacques Derrida

CONTENTS

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.

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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 Superieure* (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

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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.

Notes 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 priorities 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,

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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.

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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.

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7.3.5 Supplement

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

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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.

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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 advocation 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.

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7.6.2 Wholly Other/Messianic

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 foreclusionary 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.

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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

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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 Anglish 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.

Notes

Self-Assessment

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.
8. The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation, trans. Kamuf, ed. McDonald, New York: Schocken Books, 1985 (EO).

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Unit 8: Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'—Jacques Derrida: Detailed Study

CONTENTS

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.

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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

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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 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 there 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 onto 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

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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 Nietzchean 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

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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 ethnocentricism 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 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 supplementarily. 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) supplements 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.

Notes

8.6 Key-Words

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 Scienses.
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).

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

CONTENTS

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.

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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 where. 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 Sausurre'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 getes 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.

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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."

On 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 sings 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,

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a firm principle which accounts for all things and all variance, than accept the necessity of interpretation. The second interpreration of interpretation is what Derrida calls Neitzschean 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.

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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 metonomies expressing Being as presence: essence, existence, substance, subject, truth, transcendentality, 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.

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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 Clande 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 exists 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

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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. Metonomy : 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 Clande 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 Philips 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,

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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 neoconservativism 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 neoconservativism. The extent to which Trilling may be identified with neoconservativism 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 conservativism; 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 afterone 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.

Notes 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

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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 cant prefers) in terms of trascendence 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.

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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."

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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.

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Unit 11: Freud and Literature—Lionel Trilling: Detailed Study

CONTENTS

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.

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II

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 andevaluation. 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

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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 metonomy [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 left, is less overlaid than that of the educated adult male by the properties of social habit.

(*a*) children (*b*) women

(*c*) peasands 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

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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.
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.

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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."

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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 whch, 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 Mi cult 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 hi s Rameau and does not mean us t o ; 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 t o 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 hi s 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 o f 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 ScMe r 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 Wl.

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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 quaLty 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 hi s 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 simplications, 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 ' scientdic' 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 inter-penetration of all things, and, not least important, his treatment of fadar 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 hi s 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 certain 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 i s 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 WuIptrrgisnucht 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 e g o 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 whch 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, hi s 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 sophsticate 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 what- ever 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

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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 lllusion 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 came': 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; lllusion 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

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(*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 pshcho-analysis (*d*) None of these

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

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.

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Unit 13: The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious—Jacques Lacan: An Introduction

CONTENTS

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 phsychiatric 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 GaÎtan 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.

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"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.

Notes 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 lecture 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."

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Mirror Stage

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 phallocentric 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."

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The Symbolic

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 •i•ek 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'".

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13.4 Clinical Contributions

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 phallocentrism 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".

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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 GaÎtan 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 Bathes 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.

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Unit 14: The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious—Jacques Lacan: Detailed Study

CONTENTS

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'.

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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 largelyon the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The important thing to note in this connection in 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 uttarance 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 congnitive 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 he 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 helpling 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

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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 sensewhich 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 I906-7, I908-9, and I9I0-11, which the piety of a group of his disciples caused to be published under the title, Cours de linguistique génerale, 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

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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 phenomes; 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.

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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 caption") 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.

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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 superfluousness 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 eflfect 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 words 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 specimines. 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.

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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 form 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 he 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 (Wunsherfullung). Given the act 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 cogitate 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

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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 sad 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 coaptative 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 analysand 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 Blatter. 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 Ubertragung, 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 warden. 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 (Versohnung). 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 changeswe 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 itsobject 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 asthe 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

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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 tothe 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 desireis 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 clams 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.

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14.5 Key-Words

1. Metafication : 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 Insistance 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, (tanslated 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.

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Unit 15: The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconcious—Jacques Lacan: Critical Appreciation

CONTENTS

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Examine the Insistence of the Letter in the Unconcious.
- Understand Lacan's Metonymy and Desire.

Introduction

Lacan belong to a bourgeois eatholic 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 Jacobson's theory of metaphor and metonymy to stimulate and validate his argument. Lacan analyses the entire process of metaphor and metonymy from

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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

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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 •i•ek 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.

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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 analagous 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

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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 Jacobson'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

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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).

- 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'.
- 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. Motonymy : A basic trope or figure of speech in which the name of an attribute of an object is give 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, (tanslated 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.

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