PGEG S4 02

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Literary and Critical Theory II

SEMESTER IV

ENGLISH

BLOCK 2

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SEMESTER 4

MA IN ENGLISH

COURSE 2: LITERARY AND CRITICAL THEORY II

BLOCK 2: FROM LACAN TO FISH

DETAILED SYLLABUS

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BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

Block 2 of the course Literary and Critical Theory II contains a total of five units, the details of which are as the following:

Unit 6: This unit shall deal with the life and works of the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan with particular reference to his essay "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter.*" Critics assume that Lacan has been the most controversial psychoanalyst since Freud. In his Seminar on Poe's story, Lacan is commenting on Freud's concept of the "repetition compulsion," which he translates as "repetition automatism".

Unit 7: This unit shall deal with the French Post Structuralist critic Jacques Derrida and his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". This essay was a lecture presented at Johns Hopkins University on 21st October 1966 by Derrida. "Structure, Sign, and Play" inaugurated the term deconstruction in the context of contemporary literary theory.

Unit 8: This unit is based on Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault was a philosopher, social scientist, and historian of ideas. However, he was undoubtedly one of the most powerful and influential figures who shone in Paris in the 1960s and 70s. The essay "What is an Author?" is typical of Foucault's historicizing approach. Here, Foucault shows that the idea of the author, which we tend to take for granted as a timeless, irreducible category, is, rather, a 'function' of discourse which has changed in the course of history.

Unit 9: In this unit, we shall discuss the essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact" by Hayden White. White has been an American historian whose elaboration on the concept of metahistory is an important contribution to the questioning of the traditional forms of historical thinking that often characterises Post modernism. His claim in the prescribed essay is that the manifest historical text is marked by strategies of explanation, which include explanation by argument, explanation by emplotment and explanation by ideological implication.

Unit 10: In this unit, we shall discuss the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" written by Walter Benjamin. This essay is an essay of cultural criticism, which proposes that the *aura* of a work of art is devalued by mechanical reproduction. The subject and themes of the essay have substantially influenced the fields like art history, architectural theory, cultural studies and media theory.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts

in “LET US KNOW” along with the text. We have kept “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the “FURTHER READING” which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 6: JACQUES LACAN: "SEMINAR ON *THE PURLOINED LETTER*"

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Jacques Lacan: Life and Works

6.4 Reading the Text: "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*"

6.5 Important Theoretical Issues Raised

6.6 Reception of Lacan and His Ideas

6.7 Let us Sum up

6.8 Further Reading

6.9 Answer to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.10 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the post structuralist critic Jacques Lacan
- narrate the Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" in your own words
- read Lacan's essay "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*" in terms of its important aspects
- jot down the important points raised by Lacan in the essay
- appreciate the ideas of Jacques Lacan as the most prominent psychoanalyst after Sigmund Freud

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 of the course entitled Literary and Cultural Theory II. In this unit, we shall discuss the life and works of the French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan with particular reference to his essay "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter.*" Critics assume that Lacan has been the most controversial psychoanalyst

since Freud. Giving yearly seminars in Paris from 1953 to 1981, he influenced many leading French intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, especially those associated with Post-structuralism. Thus, Lacan's ideas significantly influenced post-structuralism, critical theory, linguistics, 20th century French philosophy, film theory and clinical psychoanalysis. By the time we finish reading the unit, we shall learn that in this Seminar on Poe's story, Lacan is commenting on Freud's concept of the "repetition compulsion," which he translates as "repetition automatism". For Lacan, the repetition is the *unconscious.*

6.3 JACQUES LACAN: LIFE AND WORKS

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) the French psychoanalyst was born to middle-class Parisian Catholic parents. In the 1920s, Lacan studied medicine in Paris, beginning clinical training in psychiatry in 1927. Interested in **paranoia** (delusions of persecution) and **erotomania** (delusions of love), he connected his work with Surrealism, particularly with that of the Spanish painter Salvador Dali, a contemporary whose theory of "paranoid criticism" resonated strongly with Lacan's own research. In 1932, Lacan published his doctoral dissertation *On Paranoiac Psychosis* in *Its Relations with the Personality,* and sent a copy to Freud. Although Freud lived another seven years and passed through Paris when escaping Nazi-occupied Austria in 1938, the two men never met. Freud acknowledged receipt of the thesis by postcard.

Lacan, entered the Freudian psychoanalytical movement in 1936. But, his radical critique of the orthodox psychoanalytical theory and practice led to his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1959. The publication of his research papers and articles, later published as *Ecrits* (1964) in Paris, made him one of the leading figures who influenced the International Dissemination of Structuralist and Poststructuralist ideas of language, literature, and the nature of the human subject. His most celebrated theory: "The Unconscious is Structured Like a Language", implied his borrowing of methods and concepts of modern linguistics and tried to question Saussure's assumption that there is nothing problematic about

the bond between the 'signified' and the 'signifier' by pointing out that the two 'signifiers' ladies and gentlemen may refer to the same signified–a toilet. He concluded that language, the signifying chain, has a life of its own, which cannot be anchored to a word or thing. Perhaps, this is how his poststructuralist inclinations come to the forefront.



LET US KNOW

Influences on Lacan:

For more than thirty years, Lacan analyzed a single case: the writings of Sigmund Freud. Thus, what was revolutionary in his work was a 'reading' that, he claimed, returned to what was radical about "the Freudian discovery". Lacan read Freud through the theories of Ferdinand De Saussure and Roman Jakobson, and, in the process, they all were changed. Like Claude Levi-Strauss (by whose work he was also influenced), he found that the structuralist models opened up by Saussure made possible a sea change in theoretical thinking.

In 1938, Lacan became a member of the *Society Psychanalytique de Paris* (SPP), the official French branch of the International Psycho Analytical Society (IPA) founded by Freud in 1910. In 1953, Lacan became the president of the SPP. His practice of seeing patients for variable lengths of time (the so-called short sessions) rather than for the prescribed fifty minutes led the commission on instruction to demand that he regularize his practice. He never did so.

Lacan published only one book in his lifetime—*Ecrits* (*Writing*) published in 1966. As already mentioned above, it is a collection of assorted papers. However, he is also credited with the publication of many articles in numerous journals of the Freudian School and twenty-six of his annual book-length seminars. The most influential seminar from the literary point of view is his 1955 seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's story "Purloined Letter" (1845). In his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", Lacan shows how a text can be read even when a major piece of information is not disclosed; a lesson important for psychoanalysis. The *path* of the desired or feared letter

in Poe's story does not depend, on knowledge of its contents; and the behaviour of those who seek it creates a story around their presumptions about the contents, whether or not the letter is ever opened. In this seminar, Lacan is commenting on Freud's concept of the "repetition compulsion," which he translates as "repetition automatism." Despite its difficulty, the book was a sensation. In the same year, Lacan also spoke at Johns Hopkins University during the conference on the "Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" that launched Structuralism and Poststructuralism in the United States. Thus, together With Althusser, Derrida, Kristeva, and many others; Lacan became very closely associated with the intellectual ferment in Paris. In 1975, Lacan visited the United States again, lecturing at Yale University and MIT.

Real, Imaginary and Symbolic

For Lacan, there are three orders or dimensions in the psyche: the **Symbolic**, the **Imaginary**, and the **Real**. They are all equally important to the formation of subjectivity. The Real is the easiest to define and the hardest to talk about. The moment it becomes an object of discourse, it ceases to be the Real because it becomes 'real' for *someone* and becomes the truth. In his essay, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" Lacan writes, "We are used to the real. The truth we repress", "The truth is always disturbing". The Real can thus only be studied in its effects on the other two dimensions, the "Imaginary" and the "Symbolic". The "Imaginary" originates in the human being's fascination with form. The relation between the self and its image constitutes the Imaginary dimension so named not because it is unreal, but because it involves an image. The Symbolic, in contrast, is the dimension of symbolization into which the body of human being, when he/she begins to *speak,* must translate itself. The Symbolic is the dimension of articulation, not equivalent to pointing or naming.

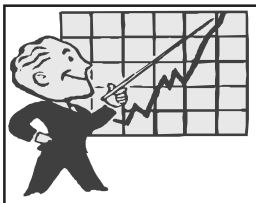
"The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" (I957), develops some aspects of the "symbolic" structure of the psyche. It is one of Lacan's most explicit structuralist attempts to bring Freud and Saussure together. The 'unconscious', for Lacan, is not a hidden reservoir of repressed desires but rather a form of rhetorical energy designed both to disguise and to express those desires, which exist for psychoanalysis only in their effects.

For him **"The unconscious is structured like a language."** This does not mean that the 'unconscious' *is* language, but that the 'unconscious' is *like* a language. In other words, the 'unconscious' is *structured,* not amorphous, and it *speaks* rhetorically through the dreams, mistakes, and symptoms of the subject. In the case of psychoanalytic symptoms, it is the body itself that provides the raw material that the 'unconscious' uses to express itself and that the analyst, like a literary critic, must "read" Saussure's influential model of the linguistic sign has two parts: the sign is composed of a *signifier* and a *signified.*



LET US KNOW

In "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" Lacan extends the theories of Saussure and Jakobson in the direction of Freud's implicit rhetoric of unconscious processes, while at the same time drawing on modern linguistics to precisely formulate that which, in Freud; remains largely intuitive. [Read the essay "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge and Nigel Wood]



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why was Lacan expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association?

Q 2: Why is Lacan's *Ecrits* so important?

Q 3: What does Lacan show through his story "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"?

Q 4: How does Lacan view the concept of the "Unconscious"?

6.4 READING THE TEXT: "SEMINAR ON *THE PURLOINED LETTER*"

The Storyline: (Taken from Wikimedia)

"The Purloined Letter" is a short story by American author Edgar Allan Poe. It is the third of his three detective stories featuring the fictional detective

Auguste Dupin, the other two being "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt". In this story, an unnamed narrator is discussing with the famous Parisian detective Dupin some of his most celebrated cases when they are joined by the Prefect of the Police, a man known as G—. The Prefect has a case he would like to discuss with Dupin. A letter has been stolen from the boudoir of an unnamed woman by the unscrupulous Minister D—. It is said to contain compromising information. D— was in the room, saw the letter, and switched it for a letter of no importance. Subsequently, he has been blackmailing his victim. The Prefect makes two deductions with which Dupin does not disagree:

1. The contents of the letter have not been revealed, as this would have led to certain circumstances that have not arisen. Therefore, Minister D— still has the letter in his possession.
2. The ability to produce the letter at a moment's notice is almost as important as actual possession of the letter. Therefore, he must have the letter close at hand.

The Prefect says that he and his police detectives have searched the Ministerial hotel where D—stays and have found nothing. They checked behind the wallpaper and under the carpets. His men have examined the tables and chairs with magnifying glasses and then probed the cushions with needles but have found no sign of interference; the letter is not hidden in these places. Dupin asks the Prefect if he knows what he is seeking and the Prefect reads off a minute description of the letter, which Dupin memorizes. The Prefect then bids them good day.

A month later, the Prefect returns, still bewildered in his search for the missing letter. He is motivated to continue his fruitless search by the promise of a large reward, recently doubled, upon the letter's safe return, and he will pay 50,000 francs to anyone who can help him. Dupin asks him to write that check now and he will give him the letter. The Prefect is astonished, but knows that Dupin is not joking. He writes the check and Dupin produces the letter. The Prefect determines that it is genuine and races off to deliver it to the victim.

Alone together, the narrator asks Dupin how he found the letter. Dupin explains the Paris police are competent within their limitations, but have underestimated with whom they are dealing. The Prefect mistakes the Minister D— for a fool, because he is a poet. For example, Dupin explains how an eight-year-old boy made a small fortune from his friends at a game called "Odds and Evens". The boy was able to determine the intelligence of his opponents and play upon that to interpret their next move. He explains that D—knew the police detectives would have assumed that the blackmailer would have concealed the letter in an elaborate hiding place, and thus hid it in plain sight.

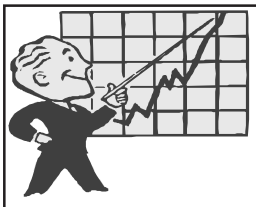
Dupin says he had visited the minister at his hotel. Complaining of weak eyes, he wore a pair of green spectacles, the true purpose of which was to disguise his eyes as he searched for the letter. In a cheap card rack hanging from a dirty ribbon, he saw a half-torn letter and recognized it as the letter of the story's title. Striking up a conversation with D— about a subject in which the minister is interested, Dupin examined the letter more closely. It did not resemble the letter the Prefect described so minutely; the writing was different and it was sealed not with the "ducal arms" of the S— family, but with D—'s monogram. Dupin noticed that the paper was chafed as if the stiff paper was first rolled one way and then another. Dupin concluded that D— wrote a new address on the reverse of the stolen one, re-folded it the opposite way and sealed it with his own seal.

Dupin left a snuffbox behind as an excuse to return the next day. Striking up the same conversation they had begun the previous day, D was startled by a gunshot in the street. While he went to investigate, Dupin switched D's letter for a duplicate.

Dupin explains that the gunshot distraction was arranged by him and that he left a duplicate letter to ensure his ability to leave the hotel without D suspecting his actions. If he had tried to seize it openly, Dupin surmises D might have had him killed. As both a political supporter of the Queen and old enemy of the Minister [who had done an evil deed to Dupin in Vienna years before], Dupin also hopes that D will try to use the power he no longer has, to his political downfall, and at the end be presented with an insulting note that implies Dupin was the thief.

This story by Poe, which was adopted by Lacan, provoked a debate among the literary theorists in the 1960s and 1970s. Lacan argued in *Ecrits* that the content of the Queen's letter is irrelevant to the story and that the proper "place" of the signifier (the letter itself) is determined by the symbolic structure in which it exists and is displaced, first by the Minister and then by Dupin.

Lacan's "Seminar on *the Purloined Letter*" analyzes the Edgar Allan Poe short story. Lacan's point is to investigate "repetition automatism," which was a puzzle for Freud: if all of our actions come from the libido (the pleasure principle), then why do we sometimes engage in repetitive, self-destructive behaviour. Lacan's explanation is that the unconscious is not just a bundle of drives, but is made up of symbolic strings, which participate in systems that have their own internal logic and thus motive force. In the story, the various characters take on certain roles in reaction to a letter being used to blackmail the Queen of France. The content of the letter is not divulged to the reader (is it evidence of an affair? a political plot? embarrassing fan fiction?), and so Lacan describes it as a "pure signifier" whose travel among the various characters constitutes a repetitive cycle: coming into possession of the letter pushes characters into a state of vulnerability, until at the end Lacan reveals that the supposed hero-genius of the story (who incidentally was a direct influence on the creation of Sherlock Holmes; this series of stories pretty much invented the modern detective story) has himself exposed his backside (figuratively) to the analyst, i.e. Lacan and his readers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What does Lacan state about the contents of the Queen's letter?

Q 6: In what way, did Lacan prove the letter to be a pure signifier?

6.5 IMPORTANT THEORETICAL ISSUES RAISED

[Adapted from Sean Homer's *Jacques Lacan*]

Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter* was first delivered in 1954. It was written up the following year and formed the introductory essay to the

original French publication of the *Ecrits*, although it was removed from later editions. By placing the seminar at the beginning of the *Ecrits,* Poe served a dual function: it both represented what was to follow and, more importantly, it established a particular mode of reading. In order to read Lacan, the story seems to be saying, one must follow the path of the signifier, and the remainder of *Ecrits* is fundamentally concerned with the laws of the signifier'. The 1954–5 seminar series was given the overall title *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* and concerned Freud's late metapsychological text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1984b [1920]). Lacan was primarily concerned with Freud's idea of repetition compulsion, that is, the compulsive urge to repeat unpleasant experiences in apparent disregard of the pleasure principle. Lacan called this process 'repetition automatism' and associated it with his idea of the insistence of the signifying chain. Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter* is an illustration of this thesis, that is, *the insistence of the signifying chain and the determination of the subject by the signifier*.

Edgar Allan Poe's (1809–49) short story *The Purloined Letter* was the final tale in a trilogy about the detective, M. Dupin. The story concerns the theft of a letter from the Queen by one of the King's Ministers and the search for this letter first, unsuccessfully, by the police and then, successfully, by Dupin. The twist in Poe's story is that the letter is in fact never hidden but always in full disclosure. According to Lacan, the tale can be divided into two scenes. In the first, a letter is delivered to the Queen in the presence of the King and the Minister and the Queen leaves the unopened letter on the table in front of everyone. The Minister immediately realizes the incriminating nature of the letter and picks it up off the table, leaving the Queen unable to ask for its return without alerting the King to its importance. The police secretly search for the letter but are unable to find it because they assume that the Minister has hidden it, whereas he has also left the letter on open display in a letter rack hanging from his mantelpiece. In the second scene, we have a repetition of the first, but now the Minister possesses the letter, the police are in the position of not being able to see what is directly under their noses and Dupin is able to see the significance of the now disguised letter openly hanging from the mantelpiece.

Lacan's interpretation of Poe's story focuses upon two main themes: first, the anonymous nature of the letter, which for Lacan serves as the 'true subject' of the story, and, second, the pattern of intersubjective relationships that are repeated in the tale. The reader knows nothing about the letter except that the original script was in a male hand and that it will compromise the Queen if the King knows of its contents. As the letter passes from hand to hand–from Queen to Minister, Minister to Dupin, Dupin to Prefect of Police, Prefect of Police back to Queen – it forms a 'symbolic pact', situating each person who possess it within a chain of symbolic relations. Furthermore, the tale duplicates the relationships between the Queen, King and Minister in the first half of the tale with the relationships between the Minister, Prefect of Police and Dupin in the second. These rotating positions, or intersubjective relationships, pivot around the shifting position of the letter itself. As the content remains unknown throughout this process of symbolic exchange, we can also say that the letter is a signifier without a signified.

According to Lacan, the various subject positions in the tale can be defined by three distinct forms of 'glance' or 'gaze'. The first glance is the glance that sees nothing, that is to say, the position of the King in the first scene and the police in the second. This, then, can also be seen as the position of the law – the law as blind. The second glance is the glance that 'sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides' (1988c [1956]: 32). This is the position of the Queen in the first scene and the Minister in the second. The third glance is the glance that 'sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it' (1988c [1956]: 32). This is the position occupied formerly by the Minister and latterly Dupin. We have then a duplicate triangular structure:

King **Police**

L **L**

Queen Minister **Minister Dupin**

For Lacan, *The Purloined Letter* is a precise illustration of his idea that it is the signifier (the letter) that determines the subject. What he is proposing,

in fact, is a correlation between the three subject positions he identifies in the story and his three orders or registers: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, which we can represent thus:

Real

L

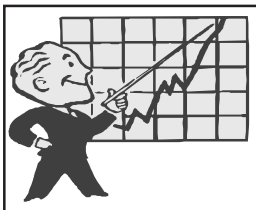
Imaginary Symbolic

Lacan observes that the King and 'the detectives have so immutable a notion of the real' (1988c [1956]: 39) that they fail to notice what is beneath their very noses. This is what Lacan calls the 'realist's imbecility' or a naive empiricism that thinks that the world is given and we have a direct, unmediated, relationship to it. The second position is that of the seer. In this position the subject sees both that the first position is blind and unaware of what is happening and that the third position is fully aware of what is unfolding and therefore holds the power. However, in this position the subject believes that what is hidden (the secrets of the letter) can remain hidden and therefore 'delude' him/herself that it is they who possess the signifier (the letter). In the second position, then, the subject occupies an essentially narcissistic relation to the letter and this corresponds to the imaginary phase we outlined in the previous chapter. The third position is symbolic and in this position the subject 'discerns the role of structure in the situation and acts accordingly' (Muller and Richardson 1988: 63). This is the position of the Minister in the first scene and Dupin in the second. Both figures can see what is taking place in front of them, they understand the implications of the letter, and moreover they know how to act. This is the position of the subject in the symbolic order; a subject who understands their situation within a larger structure and the function of that structure in determining their actions. First the Queen and then the Minister believe they can possess the letter and keep it hidden. Lacan, however, argues that it is the letter (the signifier) that possesses the subject; it is the signifier that inscribes the subject in the symbolic order. When the Minister takes and hides the letter he readdresses it to himself, but in doing so, he changes the masculine script of the original to a feminine one. Thus, suggests Lacan, he is caught up 'in the dynamics of repetition that drag him into the second position' (Muller and Richardson



The 1950s were a period of extraordinary innovation for Lacan. Through the influence of the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, Lacan developed his central notion of the symbolic order and the subject as subject of the signifier. This facilitated Lacan's break with traditional psychoanalysis and paved the way for his major innovation – the idea that the unconscious is structured like a language. In the following chapter, we will see what Lacan means by this as well as what distinguishes the Lacanian from the Freudian unconscious and how the emphasis of his work changes from the mid-1960s onwards.

1988: 63). Similarly, Dupin cannot resist leaving his signature on his own replacement letter and in doing so he is immediately dragged into the second narcissistic position.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What was the dual function of Lacan when he included the essay in his book *Ecrits*?

Q 8: Which are the two main themes in Lacan's interpretation of the story of Poe?

6.6 RECEPTION OF LACAN AND HIS IDEAS

In 1966, Lacan published the collection of his essays and conference papers titled *Ecrits (Writings).* Despite its difficulty, the book was a sensation as crowds began filling his weekly seminar. Along With other French thinkers, Lacan spoke that same year at Johns Hopkins University at a conference "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" that launched structuralism and Post-structuralism in the United States. And together with Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, and many others; Lacan became very closely associated with the intellectual ferment that helped lead to the student demonstrations in May 1968 in Paris. Indeed, some of his students became so disruptive that the director of the Ecole Normale made it known to Lacan that he-would have to seek another venue. In 1969, he began holding his seminars at the: Faculte de Droit (Law School). Meanwhile, at the just-opened branch of the, University of Paris at Vincennes, the, first university department of psychoanalysis in France was created by people sympathetic to Lacan. Among them was Jacques-Alain Miller, a student of Althusser, who later became important as Lacan's editor and son-in-law. In 1975, Jacques Derrida published his response to Lacan's essay as "The Purveyor of Truth." In short, he criticized Lacan for not analyzing a text in such a way that makes use of Derrida's deconstruction and his related claims about metaphysics and language. Even though Lacan is suspicious of traditional philosophical claims about truth, Derrida claimed that the old

fashioned "metaphysics of presence" was still alive and well in Lacan's analysis, that Lacan depicted the act as speech as primary over writing, and that Lacan in analyzing the themes and content of the story and not the style of storytelling was missing the point of literary analysis.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Why is the conference "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" held at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore is significant for Lacan?



6.7 LET US SUM UP

As we finish reading the unit on Lacan's "Seminar on The Purloined Letter", we have seen how a text can be read even when a major piece of information is not disclosed—an important lesson for psychoanalysis. The *path* of the desired or feared letter in Poe's story does not depend, on knowledge of its contents; and the behaviour of those who seek it creates a story around their presumptions about the contents. The story is composed of two different scenes in which the same letter is stolen: the two scenes are repetitions of each other with the set roles being played by different characters. According to Lacan, the repetition is *unconscious.* For Lacan, in other words, Poe's story illustrates the fact that, the letter's position among the characters, and not the psychology of the individuals, determines what each will do. Although the story's reader never gains access to the text of the letter, the story's characters do read it; like the analyst, we the readers shall have to understand the functioning of the repetition without necessarily knowing its content.



6.8 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Purloined_Letter

6.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (Hints Only)

Ans to Q 1: Lacan, entered the Freudian psychoanalytical movement in 1936. But, his radical critique of the orthodox psychoanalytical theory and practice led to his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1959.

Ans to Q 2: The publication of his research papers and articles as *Ecrits* (1964) in Paris made him one of the leading figures who influenced the International Dissemination of Structuralist and Poststructuralist ideas of language, literature, and the nature of the human subject.

Ans to Q 3: Lacan shows how a text can be read even when a major piece of information is not disclosed… …an important lesson for psychoanalysis… …The *path* of the letter in Poe's story does not depend, on knowledge of its contents… …the behaviour of those who seek it creates a story around their presumptions about the contents, whether or not the letter is ever opened.

Ans to Q 4: The 'unconscious', for Lacan, is not a hidden reservoir of repressed desires but rather a form of rhetorical energy designed both to disguise and to express those desires, which exist for

psychoanalysis only in their effects. For him "The unconscious is structured like a language."

Ans to Q 5: Lacan argued in *Ecrits* that the content of the Queen's letter is irrelevant to the story and that the proper "place" of the signifier (the letter itself) is determined by the symbolic structure in which it exists and is displaced, first by the Minister and then by Dupin.

Ans to Q 6: According to Lacan the unconscious is not just a bundle of drives, but made up of symbolic strings… …the various characters in the story take on certain roles in reaction to a letter being used to blackmail the Queen of France… …the content of the letter is not known—it might be an evidence of an affair, a political plot, or just fiction… …Lacan describes it as a "pure signifier" whose travel among the various characters constitutes a repetitive cycle.

Ans to Q 7: By including the seminar at the beginning of the *Ecrits,* Poe served a dual function: it both represented what was to follow and it established a particular mode of reading… …in order to read Lacan, the story seems to be saying, one must follow the path of the signifier, and the remainder of *Ecrits* is fundamentally concerned with the laws of the signifier'.

Ans to Q 8: Lacan's interpretation of Poe's story focuses upon two main themes: first, the anonymous nature of the letter, which for Lacan serves as the 'true subject' of the story, and, second, the pattern of intersubjective relationships that are repeated in the tale.

Ans to Q 9: "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" launched structuralism and Post-structuralism in the United States… …and together with critics and theorists such as Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, and many others; Lacan became very closely associated with the intellectual ferment that helped lead to the student demonstrations in May 1968 in Paris.



1.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss Lacan's contributions to 20th century literary theory.

Q 2: What are the three orders or dimensions in the psyche according to Lacan? Elaborate.

Q 3: Lacan's "Seminar on *the Purloined Letter*" analyzes the Edgar Allan Poe short story. Lacan's point here is to investigate "repetition automatism." Discuss with reference to the storyline.

Q 4: Discuss Lacan's contributions to Psychoanalysis in the 20th century.

Q 5: Write a note on the reception of Jacques Lacan and his ideas.

Q 6: Provide an overview of the life and works of the important post structuralist Jacques Lacan with reference to his book *Ecrits*.

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UNIT 7: JACQUES DERRIDA: "STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY IN THE DISCOURSE OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Jacques Derrida: Life and Works

7.4 Reading the Text: "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"

7.5 Important Theoretical Concepts under Derrida's 'Deconstruction'

7.6 Reception of Derrida and His Ideas

7.7 Let us Sum up

7.8 Further Reading

7.9 Answer to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.10 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Post structuralist critic Jacques Derrida
- read about the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" and understand its significance
- jot down the important concepts raised by Derrida in the text of the essay
- appreciate Jacques Derrida as the most prominent post structuralist theorist along with Lacan and Foucault

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall deal with the French Post Structuralist critic Jacques Derrida and his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". This essay was a lecture presented at Johns Hopkins University on 21st October 1966 by Derrida. The lecture was then published

in 1967 as a chapter in his book *Writing and Difference.* "Structure, Sign, and Play" identifies a tendency for philosophers to denounce each other for relying on problematic discourse, and argues that this reliance is to some degree inevitable because we can only write in the language we inherit. Discussing the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Derrida argues that we are all *bricoleurs*, creative tinkerers who must use the tools we find around us. Although presented at a conference intended to popularize structuralism, the lecture is widely cited as the starting point for post-structuralism in the United States. Along with Derrida's longer text *Of Grammatology*, this essay is also inaugurated the process of deconstruction. By the end of the unit, we should be able to understand the different ideas and concepts developed by Derrida through this essay.

7.3 JACQUES DERRIDA: LIFE AND WORKS

Derrida was a French thinker who taught philosophy at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris. He made a tremendous impact on contemporary literary studies, especially in the universities of America where his notion of '**Deconstruction**' became a major intellectual force in 1970s and 80s. Derrida's intellectual deliberations were directed against metaphysics that extends from Nietzsche to Heidegger. His critique of the 'presence of consciousness' owes much to Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious. His challenge against the idealist concept of language is an extension of principles laid down by Ferdinand de Saussure and his Structuralist undertakings.

Born in Algeria to French-speaking Jewish parents, Derrida began life in an environment that was both multilingual and culturally complex. Like other Algerian Jews, he experienced firsthand the shifting borderlines of Frenchness: he was excluded from school as non-French during the Vichy government's collaboration with the Nazis. The pull between Literature and philosophy, that characterizes Derrida's work, was there from the beginning. From an early stage, he was influenced by philosophers like Sorren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. But after a difficult period during

which he suffered from health problems, examination failures, and depression, in 1952 he was admitted to the prestigious Ecole Normale Superieure.

In 1966, Derrida gave a landmark lecture at the conference "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" held at Johns Hopkins University. The other dignitaries present there included intellectuals like Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Georges Poulet, and Lucien Goldmann. That conference helped shape how Structuralism and Poststructuralism began to influence literary studies in the United States. Derrida's own lecture, an extension but also a critique of Structuralism titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," was fundamental in articulating what was later seen as the "break" between the two schools.

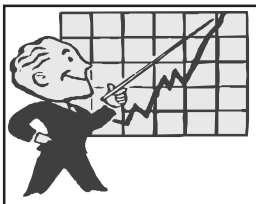
In 1967, Derrida published his first three books in French: *La Voixet le'phtnomene (Speech and Phenomena), De la Grammatologie (Of Grammatology)* and *L'Ecriture et la* diffarance *(Writing and Difference).* Derrida published three more books in 1972: *La* Dissemination *(Dissemination), Marges en la phllosophle (Margins of Philosophy)* and *Positions.* You should note that these early books are the yardstick for deconstructive literary criticism. In 1975, Derrida was invited to teach at Yale University, where he was soon considered a member of the so-called Yale School (along with Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom). From then on, his career was split between two countries, as his role became embattled and marginalized in France and increasingly active and important in the United States. Derrida died of cancer in Paris at the age of 74.



LET US KNOW

Derrida's book *Of Grammatology* is important for his investigation of the "science of writing." Derrida claims that that Western discussions of writing tend to make two claims presenting an **ethnocentric** argument that phonetic writing is the most advanced kind and a **logocentric** argument (a coinage from the Greek word *logos,* meaning, "reason, logic, word") that spoken language is

superior to written language. Thus, the form of writing that most closely approximates speech is best, and speech itself is considered primary. The consequences of these two assumptions constitute what Derrida calls "Western Metaphysics". To the extent that science itself is modelled on the logic (also from *logos)* of speech, grammatology or a *science of writing* is itself a contradiction in terms (combining *grammata,* "writing," and *logy,* "speech").



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the major intellectual deliberations of Jacques Derrida?

Q 2: Name the important critical works of Jacques Derrida.

7.4 READING THE TEXT "STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY IN THE DISCOURSE OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES" [Adapted from Wikipedia]

The essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" was a lecture presented by Derrida at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore during a conference at a conference titled "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" on 21 October 1966. The lecture was later published in 1967 as a chapter in Derrida's book *Writing and Difference* (French: *L'écriture et la différence*). Through this essay, Derrida identifies a tendency of philosophers to denounce each other for relying on problematic discourse, and argues that this reliance is to some degree inevitable because we can only write in the language we inherit. Discussing the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Derrida argues that we are all *bricoleurs* or creative tinkerers who must use the tools we find around us. Although presented at a conference intended to popularize structuralism, the lecture is widely cited as the starting point for Post-structuralism as well as deconstruction.

In the essay, Derrida discusses how philosophy and social science understand 'structures' abstractly. Derrida was dealing with structuralism,

which was a type of analysis that understands individual elements of language and culture as embedded in larger structures. The archetypal examples of Structuralism come from Ferdinand de Saussure, who showed how phonemes and words gain meaning only through relations with each other. (Derrida dealt directly with Saussure in a related book titled *Of Grammatology*). The main object of this text is Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose structuralist anthropology analyzed the relationships between elements of cultural systems such as mythology. Derrida admires the reflexivity and abstract analyses of structuralism, but argues that these discourses have still not gone far enough in treating structures as free-floating (or 'playing') sets of relationships. In particular, he accuses structuralist discourses of holding on to a "center": a privileged term that anchors the structure and does not play. Whether this center is "God", "being", "presence", or "man", its function is the same, and the history of structures is a history of substitutions, one center after another, for this constant position. Derrida suggests that this model of structure will end—is ending—and that a newer and freer (though still unknown) thinking about structures will emerge.

Occurrence of the 'event'

The essay begins by speculating, "Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an 'event', if this loaded word did not entail a meaning which it is precisely the function of structural—structuralist—thought to reduce or suspect." The 'event' involves changes in structuralism, structure, and in particular "the structurality of structure", which has hitherto been limited, writes Derrida, through the process of being assigned a stabilizing "center". The "center" is that element of a structure which appears given or fixed, thereby anchoring the rest of the structure and allowing it to play. In the history of metaphysics specifically, this function is fulfilled by different terms (which Derrida says are always associated with presence): "*eidos, archè, telos, energia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth." Whichever term is at the center of the structure, argues Derrida, the overall pattern remains



The Conference on "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" was organized by Richard A. Macksey for the newly founded Humanities Centre, at Johns Hopkins University, and the conference was sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The organisers brought a host of notable French thinkers, including Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, Jean Hyppolite and Jacques Lacan (about Lacan we have read in the previous unit). Derrida reportedly wrote his essay rather quickly within the ten to fifteen days preceding the Conference.

similar. This central term ironically escapes *structurality*, the key feature of structuralism according to which all meaning is defined relationally, through other terms in the structure. From this perspective, the center is the most alien or estranged element in a structure: it comes from somewhere outside and remains absolute until a new center is substituted in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. "The center", therefore, "is not the center."

The 'event' under discussion is the opening of the structure, which became inevitable "when the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought" and the contradictory role of the center exposed. The result of the event, according to Derrida, must be the full version of structural "*freeplay*", a mode in which all terms are truly subject to the openness and mutability promised by structuralism. Derrida locates the beginning of this process in the writings of earlier philosophers, who continued to use the pattern of metaphysics even as they denounced it in others.

Derrida in this essay depicts Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger—three of his greatest influences, as ultimately trapped within a destructive spiral of denunciation. Nietzsche questioned the power of representation and concepts to really convey truth; Freud challenged the idea that mind was limited to consciousness; and Heidegger criticized the idea of "being as presence". Derrida argues that these theoretical moves share a common form. However, all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a sort of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. [...] there are many ways of being caught in this circle. They are all more or less naïve, more or less empirical, more or less systematic, more or less close to the formulation or even to the formalization of this circle. It is these differences, which explain the multiplicity of destructive discourses and the disagreement between those who make them. It was within concepts inherited from metaphysics that Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger worked, for example. Since these concepts are not elements or atoms and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing drags along with it the whole of metaphysics. This is what allows these destroyers to destroy each other reciprocally—

for example, Heidegger, considering Nietzsche, with as much lucidity and rigor as bad faith and misconstruction, as the last metaphysician, the last "Platonist." One could do the same for Heidegger himself, for Freud, or for a number of others. And, today no exercise is more widespread.

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.

Having described a pattern—denouncing metaphysics while relying on it—in discourses about metaphysics, Derrida suggests consideration of the same pattern within the "human sciences", whose subjection to the "critique of ethnocentrism" parallels the "destruction of the history of metaphysics" in philosophy. Derrida argues that, just as philosophers use metaphysical terms and concepts to critique metaphysics (and criticize the use of these concepts by others); the ethnologist "accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them." He examines the work of *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, particularly as it concerns "the opposition between nature and culture", as his case study and primary focus for the essay.

Idea of Bricolage

Derrida highlights Lévi-Strauss's use of the term *bricolage*, the activity of a *bricoleur*. "The *bricoleur*, says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who 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 they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary." *Bricolage* becomes a metaphor for philosophical and literary critiques, exemplifying Derrida's previous argument about the necessity of using the language available. The *bricoleur'*s foil is the engineer, who creates out of whole cloth without the need for *bricolage*—

however, the engineer is merely a myth since all physical and intellectual production is really *bricolage*.

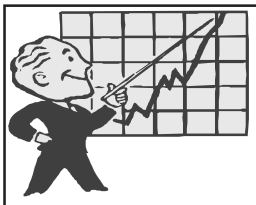
Structure and myth

Derrida praises Lévi-Strauss for his insights into the complexities, limitations, and circularities of examining 'a culture' from the outside in order to classify its mythological system. In particular, he praises Lévi-Strauss's recognition that a mythological system cannot be studied as though it was some finite portion of physical reality to be scientifically divided and conquered. Derrida quotes Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked*: In effect the study of myths poses a mythological problem by the fact that it cannot conform to the Cartesian principle of dividing the difficulty into as many parts as are necessary to resolve it. There exists no veritable end or term to mythical analysis, no secret unity which could be grasped at the end of the work in decomposition. The themes duplicate themselves to infinity. When we think we have disentangled them from each other and can hold them separate, it is only to realize that they are joining again, in response to the attraction of unforeseen affinities.

In Derrida's words, "structural discourse on myths—mythological discourse—must itself be *mythopomorphic*". Lévi-Strauss explicitly describes a limit to totalization (and at the same time the endlessness of 'supplementarity'). Thus Lévi-Strauss, for Derrida, recognizes the structurality of mythical structure and gestures towards its freeplay. But Derrida criticizes Lévi-Strauss for an inability to explain historical changes—for describing structural transformation as the consequence of mysterious outside forces (paralleling the substitute "centers" that make up the history of metaphysics). Ultimately, Derrida perceives in Lévi-Strauss "a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech", arguing that "this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay of which the Nietzschean *affirmation*—the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation—would be the other side." True free play, argues Derrida,

actually undoes this certainty about presence: Free play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Free play is always interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, free play must be conceived before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of free play and not the other way around. Derrida concludes by reaffirming the existence of a transformation within structuralism, suggesting that it espouses this affirmative view of unlimited freeplay and presenting it as unpredictable yet inevitable.

Criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Why is the conference held in Johns Hopkins University is significant?

Q 4: What is the 'event' the emergence of which Derrida celebrates in the essay?

Q 5: State what Derrida mentions about Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger in the essay.

Q 6: Derrida highlights Lévi-Strauss's use of the term *bricolage*, the activity of a *bricoleur*. Who is a *briccoleur*?

Q 7: Give the idea of the 'center' as discussed by Derrida.

7.5 IMPORTANT THEORETICAL CONCEPTS UNDER DERRIDA'S 'DECONSTRUCTION'

The name of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida is synonymous with Deconstruction a word he revived but did not invent. Often described as a 'method of analysis', 'a type of critique', an 'act of reading' or a 'way of writing', Deconstruction is a broad phenomenon. However, we cannot understand the word Deconstruction without refereeing to the various other concepts attached to it. Besides, you will notice that Derrida deliberately introduces new terms, displacing the old because old terms cannot explain

the new concepts of the present. The following are some of the important concepts under Derrida's Deconstruction.

Structure, Sign and Play: In his famous essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" through his discussion on Claude Levi-Strauss, Freud and Saussure, Derrida provided the readers with examples of deconstructive method in practice. And Derrida has done it firstly with a critique and inversion of the hierarchical binary opposition that has structured Western philosophies and by making them examples of 'Logocentrism', and secondly, by dispersing the meanings in accordance with the principles of 'difference'. So, Derrida's 'Deconstruction' starts out as a critique of the **theory of language** first propounded by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who had emphasized on the system-bound nature of language which was supposed to be self-contained with its own internal rules or 'grammar'. However, the reference to language was taken only as a model, which was later to be appropriated to other analysis of cultural phenomena. 'Deconstruction' actually argues against this notion of deep structure determining meaning within a system or of 'signs. For Derrida, meaning formation is an evolutionary process as what we consider to be a 'sign' is a 'signifier' signifying not the 'signified' but another 'signifier'. Hence, the 'sign' always fails to achieve full meaning. Language is a chaotic phenomenon and any attempt at structural ordering limits its possibilities. This radicalism can be further seen as destabilizing the Structuralist notion of binary relationships.

Derrida is known for his neologisms. For example, the word *Supplement* in French means both "substitute" and "addition". Thus, **Supplementarity** is another term coined and used by Derrida to describe a unique function of any signifying structures. Focusing on the contradictions inherent in the concept of the Supplement, Derrida says that the word itself is illusive. It may either mean something added to complete a thing or something added to an already 'complete in itself' thing.

Remembering Levi Strauss's notion of a 'floating signifier' in a signifying structure, Derrida shows how that same 'signifier', having an access of symbolic value, fills the lack on the part of the 'signified', but

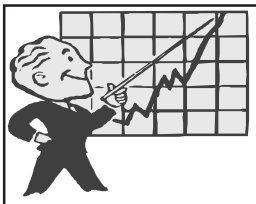
which can do so only because it exceeds the total signification of that structure and thus representing the overabundance of the 'signifier' in relation to the 'signified'.

[Read the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" from Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, edited by David Lodge and Nigel Wood]

Logocentrism: It is the term coined and used by Derrida in his book *Of Grammatology.* It denotes the position that words, writings, ideas, systems of thought are 'fixed' and are governed by some authority and external forces whose meaning they tend to convey. These outside sources may consist of something like the objects of the real 'world out there', which is beyond language and referred to by words. Common assumption about Logocentrism is that 'signs' refer to referends and words make an ascertainable, decipherable meaning present to the reader or hearer as words contain and convey some 'presence' or 'presences' form the outside world. According to Derrida, this Logocentric assumption of how words and thinking operate, has been the foundation of the whole history of Western Metaphysics and has dominated Western thought and linguistics since the time of Plato.

Differance: A neological term used by Derrida to refer to the production of differences and the endless deferral of linguistic meaning or any signifying system understood as the system of differences. It is a central term in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Derrida here accepts Saussurean ideas of language as a system of differences and then extends its principles to its ultimate consequence that meaning is produced only on the basis of the relation among the 'signifiers' not through the 'signified'. Consequently, the 'signified' is thus constantly deferred and delayed through a differential network. To mark the concept more clear Derrida juxtaposes two grammatical extensions of the verb *differer* (translated into English by two different verbs, "to differ" and "to defer"): *difference,* a noun that implies synchronic comparison, and *differance,* a noun of identical pronunciation that invokes a *process-the* temporal process of deferring or postponing.

Aporia: Aporia is a term found in Greek Rhetoric and has been traditionally being used as a figure of speech in which the speaker or character deliberates on an ambiguous question. One famous example is Hamlet's soliloquy 'To be or not to be, that is the question' which puts forward Hamlet's struggle to derive a conclusion about how he should act. This word came to signify various other connotations in the hands of the Deconstructive critics who tried to indicate certain points where we face not simply a choice of reading but a plurality of undecidable meanings. Consequently, the gap or lacuna opens up between what a text wishes to say and what it is constrained to say. The deconstructive critics start to find out aporias, or moments of self-contradictions where the text begins to undermine its own presuppositions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What does the term Deconstruction signify?

Q 9: Mention the significance of the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" by Jacques Derrida.

Q 10: What is meant by the term Logocentrism?

7.6 RECEPTION OF DERRIDA AND HIS IDEAS

(Adapted from *Norton Anthology*)

As has been stated above, Jacques Derrida's name is synonymous with deconstruction. However, we must note that Derrida is first and foremost an extraordinary critical reader. Whether he reads writings by philosophers or poets, autobiographers or anthropologists, linguists or psychoanalysts, he pulls out the threads that give the texts coherence and, at the same time, unravel them. His use of the figure of the *web* unpacks the appearance of unity presented by a book to reveal an articulation of conflicting messages woven together within it. Yet both forces-the unifying and unravelling, operate in what Derrida calls a "text." If Plato's written "dialogues" mark the beginning of the "age of writing," the writings of Derrida, perhaps, signal its end. Though Derrida is known

for his neologisms, the terms most closely associated with him are almost never his invention. He instead finds them already in the works he is reading, where they draw his attention by articulating the text in some way that has generally been overlooked. Take, for example, the word *Supplement.* In French means both "substitute" and "addition". As Derrida explains, "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. The relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce."*

Derrida is famous for producing such critical readings, which have come to be called "deconstructions." His readings go beyond the mere accuracy if "doubling commentary", but they nevertheless remain "intrinsic" to the text. Instead of rushing to expound the text's presumed content, meaning, or referent, they try to remain at the point and within the logic that renders the leap to an outside so tempting. Instead of choosing *between* incompatible or contradictory readings, Derrida attempts to understand the double binds and tensions that are articulated in the text. Rousseau, standing between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, is a figure whose writings are symptomatic of the fissures in the logocentric system that he both reproduces and resists.

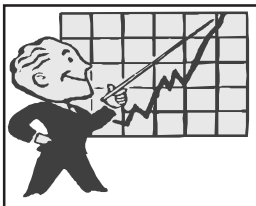
The Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure, who split the 'sign' into 'signifier' and 'signified', revolutionized the understanding of language by seeing it as a system (internally as well as externally articulated) and not as a nomenclature (a simple aggregation of names). According to Saussure, language does not arise cumulatively from either things or ideas but instead produces things or ideas out of a structure of differences. "Language is a system of differences," he says in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), "without *positive terms."* Derrida takes this concept of difference from Saussure and adds to it the dimension of temporality that Saussure's static (or synchronic) structure does not allow. In doing so, Derrida uncovers a significant contradiction in Saussure: although Saussure *thinks* he can

eliminate writing as secondary and keep speech as essential, he treats language as fixed in time and thus as if it were a dead language-a language that we can only know *in writing.*



LET US KNOW

The essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" sowed the seeds of popularity for French post-structuralism at eastern universities in the United States, particularly Johns Hopkins, Cornell, and Yale. Derrida also returned several times to the Hopkins Humanities Centre, the faculty of which still credits his influence. The colloquium also created a demand for the French intellectuals on American campuses, which led notably to Derrida's 1986 recruitment by University of California, Irvine.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: Can we say that Derrida is quite original in his use of new terms?

Q 12: What does Derrida borrow from the Swish linguist Ferdinand de Saussure?



7.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have understood the important aspects of the life and works of the important post structuralist theorist Jacques Derrida. We have also learnt that the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" besides inaugurating Post structuralism in literary theory also became instrumental in inaugurating deconstruction as a method for analysing a text. Besides, the various important concepts propounded by Derrida in this essay, also help us to acknowledge the fact that Derrida is a wilfully difficult writer.



7.8 FURTHER READING

Leitch, Vincent B. (Ed.). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* New York. W. W. Norton & Company.

Lodge, David & Nigel Wood. (Eds.). (2005). *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. New Delhi: Pearson.

Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books.

Makaryk, Arena. (Ed.). (1993). *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Seldon, Roman. (1985). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Great Britain: The Harvester University Press.

Web Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure,_Sign,_and_Play_ in_the_ Discourse_ of_the_Human_Sciences



7.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (Hints Only)

Ans to Q 1: His notion of 'Deconstruction' that became a major intellectual force in 1970s and 80s.... ...his critique of the 'presence of consciousness'… …Logocentric argument that spoken language is superior to written language… …concept of the 'sign' 'signifier' and 'signified'… … 'supplement', 'Diffarance' and so on.

Ans to Q 2: In 1967, Derrida published his first three books in French: La Voixet le'phtnomene (Speech and Phenomena), De la Grammatologie (Of Grammatology) and L'Ecriture et la diffarance (Writing and Difference). Derrida published three more books in 1972: La Dissemination (Dissemination), Marges en la phllosophle (Margins of Philosophy) and Positions.

Ans to Q 3: In 1966, Derrida gave a landmark lecture at the conference "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" at Johns Hopkins University… … that conference helped shape how

Structuralism and Poststructuralism began to influence literary studies in the United States… … Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," was fundamental in articulating what was later seen as the "break" between the two schools.

Ans to Q 4: The 'event' involves changes in structuralism, structure, and in particular "the structurality of structure", which has hitherto been limited, writes Derrida, through the process of being assigned a stabilizing "center". The "center" is that element of a structure which appears given or fixed, thereby anchoring the rest of the structure and allowing it to play.

Ans to Q 5: Derrida in this essay depicts Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger—three of his greatest influences, as trapped within a destructive spiral of denunciation. Nietzsche questioned the power of representation and concepts to really convey truth; Freud challenged the idea that mind was limited to consciousness; and Heidegger criticized the idea of "being as presence". Derrida argues that these theoretical moves share a common form. However, all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a sort of circle.

Ans to Q 6: The *bricoleur*, according to Lévi-Strauss, is someone who 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 they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary.

Ans to Q 7: Derrida accuses structuralist discourses of holding on to a "center": a privileged term that anchors the structure and does not play. Whether this center is "God", "being", "presence", or "man", its function is the same, and the history of structures is a history of substitutions, one center after another, for this constant position… …according to Derrida, this model of structure will end—is ending—and that a newer and freer thinking about structures will emerge.

Ans to Q 8: a 'method of analysis', 'a type of critique', an 'act of reading' or a 'way of writing'.

Ans to Q 9: Derrida in this essay, through his discussion on Claude Levi-Strauss, Freud and Saussure, provides the readers with examples of deconstructive method in practice… … Derrida has done it firstly with a critique and inversion of the hierarchical binary opposition that has structured Western philosophies and then by making them examples of 'Logocentrism'.

Ans to Q 10: It is a term coined and used by Derrida in his book *Of Grammatology.* It denotes the position that words, writings, ideas, systems of thought are 'fixed' and are governed by some authority and external forces whose meaning they tend to convey… …Derrida breaks this notion.

Ans to Q 11: No… …the terms most closely associated with him are almost never his invention… …for example, the word *Supplement* is borrowed from French, which means both "substitute" and "addition".

Ans to Q 12: Ferdinand De Saussure, who split the 'sign' into 'signifier' and 'signified', revolutionized the understanding of language by seeing it as a 'system'… …he reiterated that "Language is a system of differences"… …Derrida takes this concept of difference from Saussure and adds to it the dimension of temporality that Saussure's static (or synchronic) structure does not allow.



7.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the key concepts under 'Deconstruction' with particular reference to Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

Q 2: How does Derrida formulate the concept of the 'center' in the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"?

Q 3: What are the important concepts Derrida develops as part of his theory of Deconstruction? Give a detailed answer.

Q 4: What do you understand by the terms 'Logocentrism' and 'playfulness of the structure'? Discuss with reference to his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

Q 5: Discuss what Derrida states about the idea of the 'center' in the essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

Q 5: What is the 'function' of language? How do the functions differ from one another? How do the interrelations among the functions decide the nature of a message?

Q 6: What is poetic function? How do different genres of verbal are or poetry differ from one another? Discuss.

Q 7: Contextualise Roman Jakobson in the history of the development of Russian Formalism.

Q 8: Estimate the contribution of Jakobson in the development of Structuralism.

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UNIT 8: MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926-1984): "WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?"

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Michel Foucault: Life and Works

8.4 Reading the text: "What is an Author?"

8.5 Important Theoretical Issues Raised

8.6 Reception of Michel Foucault and His Ideas

8.7 Let us Sum up

8.8 Further Reading

8.9 Answer to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.10 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Michel Foucault
- read the essay "What is an Author?" in terms of its various important aspects
- write about the idea of an author as projected by a post structuralist theorist like Foucault
- write a note on the reception of Foucault as a leading post tructuralist of his time

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is based on Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault (1926-84) was, at the time of his death, Professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the *Collège de France* in Paris, a title that succeeds (or fails) as much as any other single phrase in the effort to encapsulate his unique, inter-disciplinary field of research. He has been variously described as philosopher, social scientist, and historian of ideas. However, he was undoubtedly one of the most powerful and influential figures

who shone in Paris in the 1960s and 70s. The essay "What is an Author?" is typical of Foucault's historicizing approach. Here, Foucault shows that the idea of the author, which we tend to take for granted as a timeless, irreducible category, is, rather, a 'function' of discourse which has changed in the course of history.

8.3 MICHEL FOUCAULT: LIFE AND WORKS

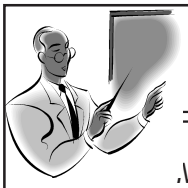
Foucault (1926-1984) was born in Poitiers France. He took his university degree at the Ecole Normale Superieure where he specialized in the philosophy of psychology. Later he became the professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the College de France in Paris. However, he has been described variously as a philosopher, social scientist, and historian of ideas. His works call attention to the role of language in the exercise and preservation of power.

Unlike the Structuralists like Levi-Strauss and Barthes, who used language and linguistics as their methodological tool, Foucault used the history of social and political institutions and discourses. His claim over the instability of any universal truth had a powerful impact on writing of literary history in Britain and America. Foucault believes that the world is more than a galaxy of texts, and that some theories of textuality usually ignore the fact that any discourse is discursively formed out of a power-politics. Such discourses reduce the political and cosmic forces and ideological and social control to aspects of signifying processes. His major publications include *Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Order of Things* (1970), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and a multi-volumed *History of Sexuality* left unfinished by his sudden death.

Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* is an important book for scholars and readers. A major theme of this book and his next undertaking *The Birth of the Clinic* is an attack on the Institutions and procedures characteristic of modern medicine. They inaugurate Foucault's lifelong preoccupation with the ways in which individuals are "administered" by the various bureaucratic institutions—hospitals, prisons, the military, schools—that increasingly render the selves docile in the modern world. His next

book *The Order of Things* examines how the disciplines of economics, linguistics, and biology emerged. Foucault attempted to explicate and justify the methodology of *The Order of Things* in his next major book *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* By 1969, Foucault's focus had shifted away from intellectual history and methodological meditations. He became politically active and remained so to the end of his life. His book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) is a direct outgrowth of his work on prison reform. From 1970 on, Foucault spent longer and longer stints in North America as a lecturer or visiting professor at various universities-most notably at the University of California at Berkeley, where the New Historicists gathered around Stephen Greenblatt brought Foucault-inspired work directly into literary studies.

In a 1976 lecture series, Foucault briefly summarized the general impetus of the Poststructuralist movement like this: "...For the last ten or fifteen years, the immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses; a sort of general feeling that the ground was crumbling beneath our feet, especially in places where it seemed most familiar, most solid, and closest to us, to our bodies, to our everyday gestures. But alongside this crumbling and the astonishing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local critiques, the facts were also revealing something... beneath this whole thematic, through it and even within it, we have seen what might be called the insurrection of subjugated knowledges." [Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 7th January, 1976]



LET US KNOW

Foucault's important publications include the following:

Madness and Civilization (1965) [first published in France, 1961]

The Order of Things (1970) [1966]

The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972) [1969]

Discipline and Punish (1977) [1975]

Power, Knowledge and the Subject

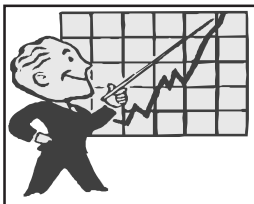
In both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault developed an influential account of the interconnections among power, knowledge, and the subject. He famously stated, "Power is exercised, rather than possessed", and insisted that power is not repressive but "productive". Power, in Foucault's view, does not belong to anyone, nor does it all emanate from one specific location, such as the state. Rather, power is diffused throughout social institutions, and is exercised by innumerable, replaceable functionaries. Thus, for example, the teacher exercises power over students, and schools have countless ways of governing students' behaviour. However, the teacher holds that power only as a function of his or her place in the institution. Both teacher and students are located (though differently) within the institution, and both go through their paces within a network that guides and oversees their conduct.

Foucault held the view that the **knowledge** produced in psychology, sociology, anthropology, criminology, and medicine is itself an integral part of the discursive ordering and physical management wielded by modern power. Thus, Foucault uses the term ***Power/knowledge*** to indicate how the production of knowledge is wedded to productive power. Modern power requires increasingly narrow categories through which it analyzes, differentiates, identifies, and administers the individuals in a society. The psychological test, for example, tells us what needs to be done: is this murderer a criminal who must be sent to prison, or an insane person who must be sent to a hospital. Thus, power/knowledge undercuts any lofty humanistic narrative of "the life of the mind" or "the disinterested pursuit of knowledge." The intellectual comes to look like power's dupe, or perhaps a privileged insider to power's activities. The university, in particular, serves a dual function. As gatekeeper, it sorts students via grades, exams, course requirements, and so on, thereby limiting access to various cherished places in the social hierarchy, such as medical careers. At the same time, the university undertakes funded research, thereby producing the knowledge through which populations are observed and managed. However, in later times, Foucault's thoughts on the power/ knowledge nexus have sparked off intense criticisms of his works.



LET US KNOW

Foucault was often at pains to deny that he was a 'structuralist', but he may legitimately be described as a Post-structuralist. Structuralism ignored or distrusted the superficial appearance or commonsense view of cultural phenomena in its efforts to grasp the conditions of their possibility. Foucault did the same, but where the structuralists like Lévi-Strauss, or the early Barthes, used language and linguistics as their methodological model or tool, Foucault used the history of social and political institutions and discourses.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention some of the important works of Michel Foucault.

Q 2: What is the role of an author, according to Foucault?

Q 3: State Foucault's views on Power.

8.4 READING THE TEXT: "WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?"

[Taken from David Lodge and Nigel Wood's Anthology]

The following are some excerpts from Foucault's essay. We shall do well if we can highlight the important points discussed in the essay.

The coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary, and superimposed scansions in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work.

I shall not offer here a socio-historical analysis of the author's persona. Certainly it would be worth examining how the author became individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what kind of system

of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes, and how this fundamental category of 'the-man-and-his-work criticism' began. For the moment, however, I want to deal solely with the **relationship between text and author and with the manner in which the text points to this 'figure' that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it.**

Beckett nicely formulates the theme with which I would like to begin: '"What does it matter who is speaking"… In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing [*écriture*]. I say 'ethical' because this indifference is not really a trait characterizing the manner in which one speaks and writes, but rather a kind of immanent rule, taken up over and over again, never fully applied, not designating writing as something completed, but dominating it as a practice. Since it is too familiar to require a lengthy analysis, this immanent rule can be adequately illustrated here by tracing two of its major themes.

First of all, we can say that today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier. **Writing unfolds like a game [*jeu*] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits.** In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.

The second theme, writing's relationship with death, is even more familiar. This link subverts an old tradition exemplified by the Greek epic, which was intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero: if he was willing to die young, it was so that his life, consecrated and magnified by death, might pass into immortality; the narrative then redeemed this accepted death. In another way, the motivation, as well as the theme and the pretext of Arabian narratives — such as *The Thousand and One Nights* — was also the eluding of death: one spoke, telling stories into the early

morning, in order to forestall death, to postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator. Scheherazade's narrative is an effort, renewed each night, to keep death outside the circle of life.

Our culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement, which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence. The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer, as in the cases of Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka. That is not all, however: this relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.

None of this is recent; criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance — or death — of the author some time ago. But the consequences of their discovery of it have not been sufficiently examined, nor has its import been accurately measured. A certain number of notions that are intended to replace the privileged position of the author actually seem to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance. I shall examine two of these notions, both of great importance today.

The first is the idea of the work. It is a very familiar thesis that the task of criticism is not to bring out the work's relationships with the author, nor to reconstruct through the text a thought or experience, but rather, to analyze the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships. At this point, however, a problem arises: 'What is a work? What is this curious unity, which we designate as a work? Of what elements is it composed? Is it not what an author has written?' Difficulties appear immediately. If an individual were not an author, could we say that what he

wrote, said, left behind in his papers, or what has been collected of his remarks, could be called a 'work'? When Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his papers? Were they simply rolls of paper onto which he ceaselessly uncoiled his fantasies during his imprisonment?

Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work. The problem is both theoretical and technical.…..How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death? A theory of the work does not exist, and the empirical task of those who naively undertake the editing of works often suffers in the absence of such a theory.

We could go even further: does *The Thousand and One Nights* constitute a work? What about Clement of Alexandria *Miscellanies* or Diogenes Laertius' *Lives?* A multitude of questions arises with regard to this notion of the work. Consequently, it is not enough to declare that we should do without the writer (the author) and study the work in itself. The word 'work' and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality.

Another notion which has hindered us from taking full measure of the author's disappearance, blurring and concealing the moment of this effacement and subtly preserving the author's existence, is the notion of writing [*écriture*]. When rigorously applied, this notion should allow us not only to circumvent references to the author, but also to situate his recent absence. The notion of writing, as currently employed, is concerned with neither the act of writing nor the indication — be it symptom or sign — of a meaning, which someone might have wanted to express. We try, with great effort, to imagine the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds.

In current usage, however, the notion of writing seems to transpose the empirical characteristics of the author into a transcendental anonymity. We are content to efface the more visible marks of the author's empiricity by playing off, one against the other, two ways of

characterizing writing, namely, the critical and the religious approaches. Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character. To admit that writing is, because of the very history that it made possible, subject to the test of oblivion and repression, seems to represent, in transcendental terms, the religious principle of the hidden meaning (which requires interpretation) and the critical principle of implicit significations, silent determinations, and obscured contents (which gives rise to commentary). To imagine writing as absence seems to be a simple repetition, in transcendental terms, of both the religious principle of inalterable and yet never fulfilled tradition, and the aesthetic principle of the work's survival, its perpetuation beyond the author's death, and its enigmatic *excess* in relation to him.

This usage of the notion of writing runs the risk of maintaining the author's privileges under the protection of writing's a priori status: it keeps alive, in the grey light of neutralization, the interplay of those representations that formed a particular image of the author. The author's disappearance, which, since Mallarmé, has been a constantly recurring event, is subject to a series of transcendental barriers. There seems to be an important dividing line between those who believe that they can still locate today's discontinuities [*ruptures*] in the historicotranscendental tradition of the nineteenth century, and those who try to free themselves once and for all from that tradition.

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers.

First, we need to clarify briefly the problems arising from the use of the author's name. What is an author's name? How does it function? Far from offering a solution, I shall only indicate some of the difficulties that it presents.

The author's name is a proper name, and therefore it raises the problems common to all proper names. (Here I refer to Searle's analyses, among others.) Obviously, one cannot turn a proper name into a pure and simple reference. It has other than indicative functions: more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description. When one says ' Aristotle', one employs a word that is the equivalent of one or a series of, definite descriptions, such as 'the author of the *Analytics*', 'the founder of ontology', and so forth. One cannot stop there, however, because a proper name does not have just one signification. When we discover that Rimbaud did not write *La Chasse spirituelle* [*The Spiritual Pursuit*], we cannot pretend that the meaning of this proper name, or that of the author, has been altered. The proper name and the author's name are situated between the two poles of description and designation: they must have a certain link with what they name, but one that is neither entirely in the mode of designation nor in that of description; it must be a *specific* link. However - and it is here that the particular difficulties of the author's name arise — the links between the proper name and the individual named and between the author's name and what it names are not isomorphic and do not function in the same way. There are several differences……..

These differences may result from the fact that an author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. Hermes Trismegistus did not exist, nor did Hippocrates — in the sense that Balzac existed — but the fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentification of some texts by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization. The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author's name, that one can say 'this was written by so-and-so' or

'so-and-so is its author', shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.

It would seem that the author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being. As a result, we could say that in a civilization like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the 'author-function,' while others are deprived of it. A private letter may well have a signer — it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor — it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer — but not an author. The author-function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.

Let us analyze this 'author-function' as we have just described it. In our culture, how does one characterize discourse containing the author-function? In what way is this discourse different from other discourses? If we limit our remarks to the author of a book or a text, we can isolate four different characteristics. First, discourses are objects of appropriation. The form of ownership from which they spring is of a rather particular type, one that has been codified for many years. We should note that, historically, this type of ownership has always been subsequent to what one might call penal appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, 'sacralized' and 'sacralizing' figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive. In our culture (and

doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act — an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. Historically, it was a gesture fraught with risks before becoming goods caught up in a circuit of ownership.

Once a system of ownership for texts came into being, once strict rules concerning author's rights, author-publisher relations, rights of reproduction, and related matters were enacted — at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century — the possibility of transgression attached to the act of writing took on, more and more, the form of an imperative peculiar to literature. It is as if the author, beginning with the moment at which he was placed in the system of property that characterizes our society, compensated for the status that he thus acquired by rediscovering the old bipolar field of discourse, systematically practicing transgression and thereby restoring danger to a writing which was now guaranteed the benefits of ownership.

The author-function does not affect all discourses in a universal and constant way, however. This is its second characteristic. In our civilization, it has not always been the same types of texts which have required attribution to an author. There was a time when the texts that we today call 'literary' (narratives, stories, epics, tragedies, comedies) were accepted, put into circulation, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author; their anonymity caused no difficulties since their ancientness, whether real or imagined, was regarded as a sufficient guarantee of their status. On the other hand, those texts that we now would call scientific — those dealing with cosmology and the heavens, medicine and illnesses, natural sciences and geography — were accepted in the Middle Ages, and accepted as 'true', only when marked with the name of their author. ' Hippocrates said', ' Pliny recounts', were not really formulas of an argument based on authority; they were the markers inserted in discourses that were supposed to be received as statements of demonstrated truth.

…….**The third characteristic of this author-function is that it does not develop spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual**. It is, rather, the result of a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call 'author'. Critics doubtless try to give this intelligible being a realistic status, by discerning, in the individual, a 'deep' motive, a 'creative' power, or a 'design', the milieu in which writing originates. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice. All these operations vary according to periods and types of discourse. We do not construct a 'philosophical author' as we do a 'poet', just as, in the eighteenth century, one did not construct a novelist as we do today. Still, we can find through the ages certain constants in the rules of author-construction.

It seems, for example, that the manner in which literary criticism once defined the author — or rather constructed the figure of the author beginning with existing texts and discourses — is directly derived from the manner in which Christian tradition authenticated (or rejected) the texts at its disposal. In order to 'rediscover' an author in a work, modern criticism uses methods similar to those that Christian exegesis employed when trying to prove the value of a text by its author's saintliness. In *De viris illustribus [Concerning Illustrious Men]*, Saint Jerome explains that homonymy is not sufficient to identify legitimately authors of more than one work: different individuals could have had the same name, or one man could have, illegitimately, borrowed another's patronymic. The name as an individual trademark is not enough when one works within a textual tradition.

How then can one attribute several discourses to one and the same author? How can one use the author-function to determine if one is dealing with one or several individuals? Saint Jerome proposes four criteria: (1) if among several books attributed to an author one is inferior to the others, it must be withdrawn from the list of the author's works (the author is therefore defined as a constant level of value); (2) the

same should be done if certain texts contradict the doctrine expounded in the author's other works (the author is thus defined as a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence): (3) one must also exclude works that are written in a different style, containing words and expressions not ordinarily found in the writer's production (the author is here conceived as a stylistic unity); (4) finally, passages quoting statements that were made, or mentioning events that occurred after the author's death must be regarded as interpolated texts (the author is here seen as a historical figure at the crossroads of a certain number of events).

Modern literary criticism, even when — as is now customary — it is not concerned with questions of authentication, still defines the author the same way: the author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design). The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing — all differences, having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be — at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious— point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction. Finally, the author is a particular source of expression that, in more or less completed forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in works, sketches, letters, fragments, and so on. Clearly, Saint Jerome's four criteria of authenticity (criteria which seem totally insufficient for today's exegetes) do define the four modalities according to which modern criticism brings the author function into play.

But the author-function is not a pure and simple reconstruction made second hand from a text given as passive material. The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time

and place, and verb conjugation. Such elements do not play the same role in discourses provided with the author function as in those lacking it. In the latter, such 'shifters' refer to the real speaker and to the spatio-temporal coordinates of his discourse (although certain modifications can occur, as in the operation of relating discourses in the first person). In the former, however, their role is more complex and variable. Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, nor the present indicative refer exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author-function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance……

No doubt analysis could discover still more characteristic traits of the author function. I will limit myself to these four, however, because they seem both the most visible and the most important. They can be summarized as follows: (1) the author-function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects — positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals.

Up to this point I have unjustifiably limited my subject. **Certainly the author function in painting, music, and other arts should have been discussed, but even supposing that we remain within the world of discourse, as I want to do, I seem to have given the term 'author' much too narrow a meaning.** I have discussed the author only in the limited sense of a person to whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed. It is easy to see that in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book — one can be the author

of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place. These authors are in a position which we shall call 'transdiscursive'. This is a recurring phenomenon – certainly as old as our civilization. Homer, Aristotle, and the Church Fathers, as well as the first mathematicians and the originators of the Hippocratic tradition, all played this role.

Furthermore, in the course of the nineteenth century, there appeared in Europe another, more uncommon, kind of author, whom one should confuse with neither the 'great' literary authors, nor the authors of religious texts, nor the founders of science. In a somewhat arbitrary way we shall call those who belong in this last group 'founders of discursivity'. They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts. In this sense, they are very different, for example, from a novelist, who is, in fact, nothing more than the author of his own text. Freud is not just the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams or Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*; Marx is not just the author of the *Communist Manifesto or Capital*: they both have established an endless possibility of discourse….

In this way, we can understand the inevitable necessity, within these fields of discursivity, for a 'return to the origin'. This return, which is part of the discursive field itself, never stops modifying it. The return is not a historical supplement which would be added to the discursivity, or merely an ornament; on the contrary, it constitutes an effective and necessary task of transforming the discursive practice itself. Re-examination of Galileo's text may well change our knowledge of the history of mechanics, but it will never be able to change mechanics itself. On the other hand, re-examining Freud's texts, modifies psychoanalysis itself just as a re-examination of Marx's would modify Marxism.

What I have just outlined regarding the initiation of discursive practices is, of course, very schematic; this is true, in particular, of the opposition that I have tried to draw between discursive initiation and scientific founding. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two; moreover,

nothing proves that they are two mutually exclusive procedures. I have attempted the distinction for only one reason: to show that the author-function, which is complex enough when one tries to situate it at the level of a book or a series of texts that carry a given signature, involves still more determining factors when one tries to analyze it in larger units, such as groups of works or entire disciplines.

To conclude, **I would like to review the reasons why I attach a certain importance to what I have said.**

First, there are theoretical reasons. **On the one hand, an analysis in the direction that I have outlined might provide for an approach to a typology of discourse.** It seems to me, at least at first glance, that such a typology cannot be constructed solely from the grammatical features, formal structures, and objects of discourse: more likely there exist properties or relationships peculiar to discourse (not reducible to the rules of grammar and logic), and one must use these to distinguish the major categories of discourse. The relationship (or nonrelationship) with an author, and the different forms this relationship takes, constitute — in a quite visible manner — one of these discursive properties.

On the other hand, I believe that one could find here an introduction to the historical analysis of discourse. Perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations, but according to their modes of existence. The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each. The manner in which they are articulated according to social relationships can be more readily understood, I believe, in the activity of the author-function and in its modifications, than in the themes or concepts that discourses set in motion….

Second, **there are reasons dealing with the 'ideological' status of the author. The question then becomes: How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world?** The answer is: One can reduce it with the author. The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within

a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches, but also with one's discourses and their significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning. As a result, we must entirely reverse the traditional idea of the author. We are accustomed, as we have seen earlier, to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely.

The truth is quite the contrary: **the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.** In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. (When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inverts it, one has an ideological production.) The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning…..

All discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: 'Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?' Instead, there would be other questions, like these: 'What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions?' And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: 'What difference does it make who is speaking?'

8.5 IMPORTANT THEORETICAL ISSUES RAISED

[Adapted from *Norton Anthology*]

The essay "What Is an Author?" questions some of the most fundamental assumptions of literary criticism. Foucault realizes that he had taken the author for granted in *The Order of Things,* and asks himself what it would mean to take seriously "the death of the author" (in Roland Barthes' famous phrase). Foucault's approach in this question is characteristic of much of his work. We must consider, he says, what "functions" the category of "author" fulfills within the "discourse" the historian or critic deploys in the analysis of written texts. The concept *author,* he points out, is an organizing device, permitting us to group certain texts together. More crucially, the concept underwrites a number of interpretive conventions. We ascribe a certain unity and coherence to all the works written by a single author, or at least we feel that an author's drastic changes in style or opinion must be explained. And we assume, at the most fundamental level, that the author is the source of the text. Interpretation moves from the written text (which may be all we know of a writer) back toward the author, searching out an Individual's biography, psychology, and intentions. The author thus functions both to organize the vast reservoir of materials that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of interpreting those materials.

Foucault's crucial point here is "humanism," the Renaissance understanding of who and what individuals are. He highlights the historical contingency of the belief that we are "individuals" with unique natures, possessing coherent interior identities, motives, desires, and conscious intentions that cause our actions. Humanism claims for each individual the capacities that literary criticism ascribes to authors. Significantly, the "author function" has not always been deemed necessary to the apprehension and interpretation of texts. Prior to 1500, anonymous texts were the norm. Even today, the importance of authors varies from field to field. A contract has no author, nor does the average poster. We barely note the authors of most newspaper articles. Generally speaking, Foucault opines that emphasis on the author is a mark of prestige, "Discourse that possesses an author's

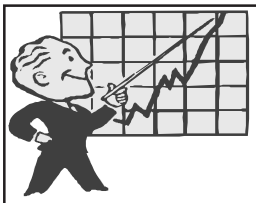
name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten .... Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates."

Foucault's essay, then invites us to examine the ways in which literary criticism approaches the text, and accords it the prestigious title of "literature" partly through the exaltation of the author (as talented, as worthy of honour and study). He also shifts our focus away from the author and toward larger systematic social forces. What if the author is not the cause, the source, of the text? What if author and text are both effects? In that case, the critic's inquiries and scrutiny need to be directed toward their common cause, toward cultural conventions and their inclusions and exclusions, not confined to formal analyses of texts or psychological investigations of writers' lives.



LET US KNOW

In "What Is an Author?" (1969) Foucault asked what "functions" the category called "author" fulfils within the "discourse" the historian or critic deploys in the analysis of written texts. The concept *author,* he points out, is an organizing device, permitting us to group certain texts together. We also assume, at the most fundamental level, that the author is the source of the text. Interpretation moves from the written text (which may be all we know of a writer) back toward the author, searching out the author's biography, psychology, and intentions. The author thus functions both to organize the vast reservoir of materials that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of interpreting those materials. Foucault's essay invites the readers to examine the ways in which literary criticism approaches its object—the text, and accords it the prestigious title of "literature" partly through the exaltation of the author (as talented, as worthy of honour and study).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

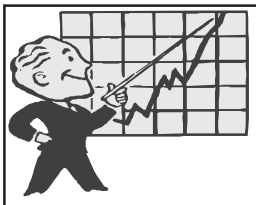
Q 4: Explain the concept of the author as devised by Foucault?

Q 5: Which statement in the text of the essay suggest that 'author' is a mark of prestige?

8.6 RECEPTION OF MICHEL FOUCAULT AND HIS IDEAS

Michel Foucault is one of the most influential European writers and thinkers of the second half of the 20th century. His works are unclassifiable and controversial and have attracted much criticism. But, the questions he raised, the topics he addressed and the positions he took have become central features of today's intellectual landscape. In literary studies, Foucault stands as a major source for Post structuralism, New Historicism, Cultural studies, and Queer theory, while also fuelling the growing interest in literature and medicine, the examination of the institutional bases from which writers and critics operate, and the interest in processes of identity formation.

As one of his commentators Paul Robinow stated, "Foucault is highly suspicious of claims to universal truths. He doesn't refute them; instead his consistent response is to historicize grand abstractions." His example has had a powerful effect upon the writing of literary history in Britain and America. The essay "What is an Author?" is typical of this historicizing approach. Foucault shows that the idea of the author, which we tend to take the for granted, as a timeless, irreducible category, is, rather, a 'function' of discourse which has changed in the course of history. For example, whereas before the Renaissance the attribution of a text to an author was more important in science than in literature, the reverse is true in the era of humanism and capitalism. In the early part of the essay, Foucault acknowledges the effort of some radical modern criticism (he may be thinking of Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author", to abolish the idea of the author as origin and owner of his work, but suggests that this easier said than done.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: In what way, has Foucault influenced literary studies?

Q 7: How does Foucault historicise the concept of the author?



The essay "What is an Author?" ends with a vision of a culture in which literature would circulate 'anonymously'; but whether this vision (which has something in common with the conclusion to Derrida essay "Structure, Sign and Play" offers an attractive prospect is open to argument. Though, Foucault's focus on the historical and institutional contexts of discourse inspired many critics on the intellectual left, his Nietzschean insistence on the struggle for power as the ultimate determinant of all human action is not encouraging to progressive political philosophies.



8.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Michel Foucault is one of the significant names in Paris along with Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida in between 1960s and 1970s. He has been variously described as a philosopher, social scientist and historian of ideas. We have learnt that Foucault was highly suspicious of claims to universal truths. He never refutes them, but his consistent response is to historicise grand abstractions. This is where Foucault can be termed a post structuralist. The essay "What is an Author". is typical of this historicising approach. He is of the view that the idea of the author, which we tend to take for granted, as a timeless irreducible category, is rather a 'function' of discourse, which has changed in the course of history. He also gave an example by stating that before the Renaissance the attribution of a text to an author was more important in science than in literature. However, in the era of humanism and capitalism, the reverse has taken place.



8.8 FURTHER READING

Leitch, Vincent B. (Ed.). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* New York. W. W. Norton & Company.

Lodge, David & Nigel Wood. (Eds.). (2005). *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. New Delhi: Pearson.

Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books.

Makaryk, Arena. (Ed.). (1993). *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Seldon, Roman. (1985). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Great Britain: The Harvester University Press.

8.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (Hints Only)

Ans to Q 1: *Madness and Civilisation… … The Birth of the Clinic… … The Order of Things… … The Archaeology of Knowledge… … Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.*

Ans to Q 2: In his essay "What Is an Author?" Foucault asked what "functions" the category called "author" fulfils within the "discourse" the historian or critic deploys in the analysis of written texts… …He pointed out that the concept of *author* is an organizing device, permitting us to group certain texts together… …the author thus functions both to organize the vast reservoir of materials that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of interpreting those materials.

Ans to Q 3: Foucault stated that "power is exercised, rather than possessed"… …power does not belong to anyone, nor does it all emanate from one specific location, such as the state… …power is diffused throughout social institutions, and is exercised by innumerable, replaceable functionaries… …for example, the teacher exercises power over students, but the teacher holds that power only as a function of his or her place in the institution.



Ans to Q 4: The concept *author* is an organizing device, permitting us to group certain texts together… …the concept underwrites a number of interpretive conventions… …we ascribe a certain unity and coherence to all the works written by a single author… …that the author is the source of the text… …usually, the interpretation moves from the written text back toward the author, searching out an Individual's biography, psychology, and intentions… …the author thus functions both to organize the vast reservoir of materials that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of Interpreting those materials.

Ans to Q 5: "Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten .... Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates."

Ans to Q 6: In literary studies, Foucault stands as a major source for Post structuralism, New Historicism, Cultural studies, and Queer theory, while also fuelling the growing interest in literature and medicine, the examination of the institutional bases from which writers and critics operate, and the interest in processes of identity formation.

Ans to Q 7: Foucault shows that we tend to take the idea of the author as a timeless, irreducible category… …rather, it is a 'function' of discourse which has changed in the course of history… …for example, whereas before the Renaissance, the attribution of a text to an author was more important in science than in literature… …however, he reverse is happening in the era of humanism and capitalism.



8.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the life and works of Michel Foucault? How does his contribution influence literary studies?

Q 2: In what way does Michel Foucault view the idea of an 'author'?

Q 3: The essay "What is an Author?" is typical of Foucault's historicising approach. Discuss.

Q 4: Do you think that Foucault's essay "What is an Authors?" is a reply to Roland Barthes' views on the 'death of the author'? Give a reasoned answer.

Q 5: Based on your reading of the essay "What is an author?"; write a note on Foucault's notion of 'writing'.

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UNIT 9: HAYDEN WHITE: "THE HISTORICAL TEXT AS LITERARY ARTEFACT"

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Hayden White: Life and Works

9.4 Reading the Text: "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact"

9.5 Important Theoretical Issues Raised

9.6 Reception of Hayden White and His Ideas

9.7 Let us Sum up

9.8 Further Reading

9.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.10 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Hayden White
- read the essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact" in terms of its various important aspects
- identify the important issues raised by White in the essay
- provide a critical reception of Hayden White as a leading theorist of his time.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss yet another important literary essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact" by Hayden White. White has been an American historian whose elaboration of metahistory in work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) is an important contribution to the questing of the traditional forms of historical thinking that often characterises Post modernism. His claim in the prescribed essay is that the manifest historical text is marked by strategies of explanation, which include explanation by argument, explanation by

emplotment and explanation by ideological implication. As we finish reading the unit, we shall understand his argument that literary writing in many ways influenced historical writing, sharing the strong reliance on narrative for meaning, therefore eliminating the possibility of objective or truly scientific history.

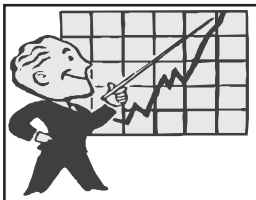
9.3 HAYDEN WHITE: LIFE AND WORKS

White was born in Martin, Tennessee. After attending Wayne State University, he did his graduate work in history at the University of Michigan, earning an M.A. in 1952 and a Ph.D. in 1956. He taught first as an instructor at Wayne State (1955-58), then in 1958 was appointed to the history faculty at the University of Rochester, where he served as head of the· department from 1962 to 1964. He subsequently taught history at the University of California, Los Angeles (1968-73), served as the director of the Center for Humanities at Wesleyan University in Connecticut (1973-77), and in 1978 became a professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Since formally retiring in 1994, he has been the Bonsall Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University.

Hayden White has been a historian by training since the 1970s. He is also a central figure in literary debates about the nature of history. While critic like Stephen Greenblatt began to turn to history to explain the formal structures of literary texts, White was examining the formal literary structures of history beginning with his celebrated 1973 book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe.* This book outlines an ambitious structuralist scheme for describing a "poetics of history." Drawing on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to describe the underlying "deep structure" of historical narratives, this project brings together historiography and literary criticism in a broad reflection on narrative and its relation to culture. "To raise the question of the nature of narrative," White writes in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), "is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself. So natural is the Impulse to narrative, inevitable is the form of narrative for any report on the way

things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture, programmatically refused."

White's basic argument is that historical narratives are verbal fictions supported by philosophical theories of history that seek to validate their 'plots.' The sequences of events they record are selected from the historical data, and plot structures are imposed upon them into a comprehensible narrative, which is told as a particular kind of story. Thus the style of any given historiographer can be described in terms of the linguistic poetic protocols he uses to shape his historical field by bringing together the explanatory strategies he uses to shape a story out of the jumbled 'chronicle' of events that make up the historical record. White is firm on his argument that history cannot reveal truth in the way that the natural sciences can; it will not reveal predictive or probable laws. Given that history is primarily a literary-narrative genre, it is to be studied from models derived from literary and theoretical studies and the truths it does reveal are of a literary or artistic order. Although there is no external point from which these truths can be judged, this does not imply that White's relativism is absolute. The choices that are made between historigraphic models do influence our understanding of the present and our visions of the future, but they are to be made on aesthetic and ethical grounds.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: In what way did Hayden White draw on Northrop Fry?

Q 2: Why does Hayden White state that historical narratives are verbal fictions?

9.4 READING THE TEXT: "THE HISTORICAL TEXT AS LITERARY ARTEFACT" [Excerpts taken from *Norton Anthology*]

One of the ways that a scholarly field takes stock of itself is by considering its history. Yet it is difficult to get an objective history of a

scholarly discipline, because if the historian is himself a practitioner of it, he is likely to be a devotee of one or another of its sects and hence biased; and if he is not a practitioner he is unlikely to have the expertise necessary to distinguish between the significant and the insignificant events of the field's development. One might think that these difficulties would not arise in the field of history itself, but they do and not only for the reasons mentioned above. In order to write the history of any given scholarly discipline or even of a science, one must be prepared to ask questions *about* it of a sort that do not have to be asked in the practice *of* it. One must try to get behind or beneath the presuppositions, which sustain a given type of inquiry, and ask the questions that can be begged in its practice in the interest of determining why this type of inquiry has been designed to solve the problems it characteristically tries to solve. **This is what metahistory seeks to do. It addresses itself to such questions as, What is the structure of a peculiarly *historical* consciousness? What is the epistemological status of historical *explanations,* as compared with other kinds of explanations that might be offered to account for the materials with which historians ordinarily deal? What are the possible *forms* of historical representation and what are their bases? What authority can historical accounts claim as contributions to a secured knowledge of reality in general and to the human sciences in ·particular?**

Now, many of these questions have been dealt with quite competently over the last quarter-century by philosophers concerned to define history's relationships to other disciplines, especially the physical and social sciences, and by historians interested in assessing the success of their discipline in mapping the past and determining the relationship of the past to the present. But, there is one problem that neither philosophers nor historians have looked at very seriously and to which literary theorists have given only passing attention. **This question has to do with the status of the historical narrative, considered purely as a verbal artifact purporting to be a model of structures and processes long past and therefore not subject to either experimental or observational controls.** This is not to say that historians and philosophers of history have failed to take notice of the

essentially provisional and contingent nature of historical representations and of their susceptibility to infinite revision in the light of new evidence or more sophisticated conceptualization of problems. One of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always-incomplete historical record. Nor is it to say that literary theorists have *never* studied the structure of historical narratives. **But, in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as *much invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.**

Now, it is obvious that this conflation of mythic and historical consciousness will offend some historians and disturb those literary theorists whose conception of literature presupposes a radical opposition of history to fiction or of fact to fancy. As Northrop Frye has remarked, "In a sense the historical is the opposite of the mythical, and to tell the historian that what gives shape to his book is a myth would sound to him vaguely insulting. Yet Frye himself grants that "when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in its structure." He even speaks of different kinds of historical myths: Romantic myths "based on a quest or pilgrimage to a City of God or classless society"; Comic "myths of progress through evolution or revolution"; Tragic myths of "decline and fall, like the works of Gibbon and Spengler"; and. Ironic "myths of recurrence or casual catastrophe." But, Frye appears to believe that these myths are operative only in such victims of what might be called the "poetic fallacy" as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Spengler, Toynbee and Sartre—historians whose fascination with the "constructive" capacity of human thought has deadened their responsibility to the "found" data. ''The historian works inductively," he says, "collecting his facts and trying to avoid any informing patterns except those he sees, or is honestly convinced he sees, in the facts themselves." He does not work "from" a "unifying form," as the poet does, but "toward" it;

and it therefore follows that the historian, like any writer of discursive prose, is to be judged "by the truth of what he says, or by the adequacy of his verbal reproduction of his external model," whether that external model be the actions of past men or the historian's own thought about such actions.

What Frye says is true enough as a statement of the *ideal* that has inspired historical writing since the time of the Greeks, but that ideal presupposes an opposition between myth and history that is as problematical as it is venerable. It serves Frye's purposes very well, since it permits him to locate the specifically "fictive" in the space between the two concepts of the "mythic" and the "historical." As readers of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* will remember, Frye conceives fictions to consist in part of sublimates of archetypal myth structures. These structures have been displaced to the interior of verbal artifacts in such a way as to serve as their latent meanings. **The fundamental meanings of all fictions, their thematic content, consist, in Frye's view, of the "pre-generic plot-structures" or *mythoi* derived from the corpora of Classical and Judaeo-Christian religious literature. According to this theory, we understand *why* a particular story has "turned out" as it has when we have identified the archetypal myth, or pregeneric plot structure, of which the story is an exemplification. And we see the "point" of a story when we 'have identified its theme** (Frye's translation of *dianoia)*, **which makes of it a "parable or illustrative fable."** "Every work of literature," Frye insists, "has both a fictional and a thematic aspect," but as we move from "fictional projection" toward the overt articulation of theme, the writing tends to take on the aspect of "direct address, or straight discursive writing and cease[s] to be literature." And in Frye's view, as we have seen, history (or at least "proper history") belongs to the category of "discursive writing," so that when the fictional element-or mythic plot structure-is *obviously* present in it, it ceases to be history altogether and becomes a bastard genre, product of an unholy, though not unnatural, union between history and poetry.

Yet, I would argue, histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called

"emplotment." And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with "fictions" in general.

The late R. G. Collingwood insisted that the historian was above all a storyteller and suggested that historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of "facts" which, in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all. In their efforts to make sense of the historical record, which is fragmentary and always incomplete, historians have to make use of what Collingwood called "the constructive imagination," which told the historian-as it tells the competent detective-what "must have been the case" given the available evidence and the formal properties it displayed to the consciousness capable of putting the right question to it. This constructive imagination functions in much the same way that Kant supposed the *a priori* imagination functions when it tells us that even though we cannot perceive both sides of a tabletop simultaneously, we can be certain it has two sides if it has one, because the very concept of *one side* entails at least *one other.* Collingwood suggested that historians come to their evidence endowed with a sense of the *possible* forms that different kinds of recognizably human situations *can* take. He called this sense the nose for the "story" contained in the evidence or for the "true" story that was buried in or hidden behind the "apparent"" story. And he concluded that historians provide plausible explanations for bodies of historical evidence when they succeed in discovering the story or complex of stories implicitly contained within them.

What Collingwood failed to see was that no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements.* The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif in repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a

novel or a play. For example, no historical event is *intrinsically tragic;* it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place. For in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another, just as in society what appears to be tragic from the standpoint of one class may be, as Marx purported to show of the 18th Brumaire of Louis Buonaparte, only a farce from that of another class. Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic-to use Frye's categories-depends upon the historian's decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another. The same set of events can serve as components of a story that is tragic *or* comic. as the case may be, depending on the historian's choice of the plot structure that he considers most appropriate for ordering events of that kind so as to make them into a comprehensible story.

This suggests that what the historian brings to his consideration of the historical record is a notion of the *types* of configurations of events that can be recognized as stories by the audience for which he is writing. True can misfire. I do not suppose that anyone would accept the emplotment of the life of President Kennedy as comedy, but whether it ought to be emplotted romantically, tragically, or satirically is an open question. The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings. Thus, for example, what Michelet in his great history of the French Revolution construed as a drama of Romantic transcendence, his contemporary Tocqueville emplotted as an ironic Tragedy. Neither can be said to have had more knowledge of the "facts" contained in the record; they simply had different notions of the kind of story that best fitted the facts they knew. Nor should it be thought that they told different stories of the Revolution because they had discovered different *kinds* of facts, political on, the one hand, social on the other. They sought out different kinds of facts because they had different kinds of stories to tell. But why did these alternative, not to say mutually exclusive, representations of what

was substantially the same set of events appear equally plausible to their respective audiences? Simply because the historians shared with their audiences certain preconceptions about how the Revolution might be emplotted, in response to imperatives that were generally extra historical, ideological, aesthetic, or mythical.

Collingwood once remarked that you could never explicate a tragedy to anyone who was not already acquainted with the kinds of situations, that are regarded as "tragic" in our culture. Anyone who has taught or taken one of those omnibus courses usually entitled Western Civilization or Introduction to the Classics of Western Literature will know what Collingwood had in mind. Unless you have some idea of the generic. attributes of tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic situations, you will be unable to recognize them as such when you come upon them in a literary text. But historical, situations do not have built into them intrinsic meanings in the way that literary texts do. Historical situations are not *inherently* tragic, comic, or romantic. They may all be inherently ironic, but they need not be emplotted. All the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift his point of view or change the scope of his perceptions. Anyway, we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage. How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation. And to call it that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledges. For not only are the pregeneric plot structures by which sets of events can be constituted as stories of a particular kind limited in number, as Frye and other archetypal critics suggest; hut the encodation of events in terms of such plot structures is one of the ways that a culture has of-making sense of both personal and public pasts.

We can make sense of sets' of events in a number of different ways. One of the ways is to subsume the events under the casual laws which may have governed their concatenation in order to produce the· particular

configuration that the events appear to assume when considered as "effects" of mechanical forces. This is the way of scientific explanation. Another way we make sense of a set of events which appears strange, enigmatic, or mysterious in its immediate manifestations is to encode the set in' terms of culturally provided categories, such as metaphysical concepts, religious beliefs, or story forms. The effect of such encodations is to familiarize the unfamiliar; and in general, this is the way of historiography whose "data" are always immediately strange, not to say exotic; simply by virtue of their distance from us in time and their origin in a way of life different from our own.

The historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another. In the process of studying a given complex of events, he begins to perceive the *possible* story form that such events *may* figure. **In his narrative account of how this set of events took on the shape which he perceives to inhere within it, he emplots his account as a story of a particular kind. The reader, in the process of following the historian's account of those events, gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, epic, or what have you.** And when he has perceived the class or type to which the story that he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him. He has at this point not only successfully *followed* the story; he has grasped the point of it, *understood* it, as well. The original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled, and they take on a familiar aspect, not in their details, but in their functions as elements of a familiar kind of configuration. They are rendered comprehensible by being subsumed under the categories of the plot structure in which they are encoded as a story of a particular kind. They are familiarized, not only because the reader now has more *information* about the events, but also because he has been shown how the data conform to an *icon* of a comprehensible finished process, a plot structure with which he is familiar as a part of his cultural endowment…..

The evasion of the implications of the fictive nature of historical narrative is in part a consequence of the utility of the concept "history" for the definition of other types of discourse. **"History" can be set over against "science" by virtue of its want of conceptual rigor and failure to produce the kinds of universal laws that the sciences characteristically seek to produce. Similarly, "history" can be set over against "literature" by virtue of its interest in the "actual" rather than the "possible," which is supposedly the object of representation of "literary" works.** Thus, within a long and distinguished critical tradition that has sought to determine what is "real" and what is "imagined" in the novel, history has served as a kind of archetype of the "realistic" pole of representation. I am thinking of Frye, Auerbach, Booth, Scholes and Kelogg, and others. Nor is it unusual for literary theorists, when they are speaking about the "context" of a literary work, to suppose that this context-the "historical milieu"-has a concreteness and an accessibility that the work itself can never have as if it were easier to perceive the reality of a past world put together from a thousand historical documents than it is to probe the depths of a single literary work that is present to the critic studying it. **But the presumed concreteness and accessibility of historical milieux, these contexts of the texts that literary scholars study, are themselves products of the fictive capability of the historians who have studied those contexts.** The historical documents are not less opaque than the texts studied by the literary critic. Nor is the world those documents figure more accessible. The one is no more "given" than the other. In fact, the opaqueness of the world figured in historical documents is, if anything, increased by the production of his to deal narratives. Each new historical work only adds to the number of possible texts that have to be interpreted if a full and accurate picture of a given historical milieu is to be faithfully drawn. The relationship between the past to be analyzed and historical works produced by analysis of the documents is paradoxical; the more we know about the past, the more difficult it is to generalize about it.

But if the increase in our knowledge of the past makes it more difficult to generalize about it, it should make it easier for us to generalise about the

forms in which that knowledge is transmitted to us. Our knowledge of the past may increase incrementally, but our understanding of it does not. Nor does our understanding of the past progress by the kind of revolutionary breakthroughs that we associate with the development of the physical sciences. **Like literature, history progresses by the production of classics, the nature of which is such that they cannot be disconfirmed or negated, in the way that the principal conceptual schemata of the sciences are.** And it is their nondisconfirmability that testifies to the essentially *literary* nature of historical classics. There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be negated, and this nonnegatable element is its form, the form which is its fiction.

So too for historical narratives. They succeed in endowing sets of past events with meanings, over and above whatever comprehension they provide by appeal to putative causal laws, by exploiting the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions. By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure. Historians may not like to think of their works as translations of fact into fictions; but this is one of the effects of their works. **By suggesting alternative emplotments of a given sequence of historical events, historians provide events with all of the possible meanings with which the literary art of their culture is capable of endowing them.** The real dispute between the proper historian and the philosopher of history has to do with the latter's insistence that events can be emplotted in one and only one story form. History writing thrives on the discovery of all the possible plot structures that might be invoked to endow sets of events with different meanings. And our understanding of the past increases precisely in the degree to which we succeed in determining how far that past conforms to the strategies of sense-making that are contained in their purest forms in literary art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What does the term 'emplotment' mean?

Q 4: What did R. G. Collingwood insist about the historians?

Q 5: In what way, according to Hayden White, can history be set over against science and literary works?

Q 6: According to White, what does Metahistory seek to do?

9.5 IMPORTANT THEORETICAL ISSUES RAISED

[Adapted from *Norton Anthology*]

"The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," provides an accessible and engaging synopsis of White's main arguments in *Metahistory* beginning with his definition of metahistory as the attempt to "get" behind or beneath the presuppositions which sustain a given type of inquiry (in this case historical inquiry)." A key assumption that, according to White, has sustained historical inquiry is the belief that history (judged by its correspondence to reality) and literature (judged as fiction) are two distinct, diametrically opposed, activities, a presupposition shared by practitioners in both disciplines. On the contrary, White argues, because history, like literature, is a verbal structure and the historian, first and foremost, is a writer, the tools that have served literary critics, the tools that compose the linguistic and rhetorical structures of a text, serve the historian well. The language in which history is written cannot be dismissed as window dressing, as most historians are tempted to do.

Language in history is never merely a means to an end; it is neither transparent nor neutral, nor does it disappear to allow the pure truth of history to emerge. In White's view, historical narratives are verbal fictions with invented contexts. He goes beyond Erich Auerbach, arguing that history, because of its claims to represent reality adequately, is the form best suited for a study of the style of narrative "realism." Histories gain their explanatory power by processing data into stories. Those stories take their shape from what White calls "emplotment," the process through which the facts

contained in "chronicles" are encoded as components of plots. Plots are not imminent in events themselves but exist in the minds of historians, who rarely reflect on them. No historical event can itself constitute a story, tragic or ironic: it can only be presented as such from a particular historian's narrative point of view. The event emerges as a plotted story, which takes on meaning when it is combined with otherelements in the limited number of generic plot structures by which a series of events can be constituted. Following Northrop Frye's archetypal analysis, White identifies four possible emplotments: tragic, comic, romantic, and ironic. These generic deep plot structures are shared between historians and their audiences by virtue of their participation in a common culture.



LET US KNOW

The kind of emplotment historians will employ to give meaning to a series of events. White argues, is determined by the dominant figurative mode of the language they use to describe these events and story elements. Drawing on the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico and the twentieth-century critic Kenneth Burke, White identifies four master tropes or modes of figurative representation-metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony-which correspond to the four types of emplotment.

For White, the differences between contending histories of, say, the French Revolution cannot be resolved by recourse to the facts, because the facts-and, more important, the relationships among those facts-do not inhere in the events themselves, but instead are constituted by historians in the linguistic and literary structures they use to identify and describe the events they study. Tropes are ineradicable from discourse, as are plots. Thus, history evokes reality: it does not reproduce or represent it. This analysis of historical narrative makes special sense in the context of the structuralism of the 1970s, when it first caught public attention. Although White does not draw directly on the terminology of structural linguistics, his debts to such modern structuralists as Claude Levi Strauss, Roman

Jakobson and the linguist Noam Chomsky are clear. And his adaptation of Frye's archetypal criticism is structuralist both in its basic argument that history uses a few "deep structures" to generate its "surface structures" and in its broad contention that historians have mistakenly focused their attention only on the surface, while ignoring the underlying deep structures that produce those narratives.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How does Hayden White prove that a historian is also a writer?

9.6 RECEPTION OF HAYDEN WHITE AND HIS IDEAS

Historians have objected to White's narrowing of history to language, while more poststructuralist-minded literary critics have taken issue with White's structuralist reductionism (only four master plots and tropes). Some critics argue that Frye's archetypal approach to narrative, which White relies on, is too simple, forcing all narratives "willy-nilly into abstract and timeless structures without regard to how they might function in particular cultural contexts. Others contend that unlike most Structuralists, White imagines plot as a quintessential expression of the historian's personal style and self. Despite these objections, White's skilful dismantling of the opposition between history and literature has paved the way for many productive studies in both fields. Once historians and literary critics no longer believe that history gives its readers a privileged access to the real or the truth, they turn to investigating the grounds of history-its nature and forms, its uses and abuses-as well as its links to other fields of knowledge and to ideologies.

White, who began his career as a historian of the medieval church and turned to nineteenth-century thought in the 1960s, has always been eclectic in his scholarly interests. With the publication of *Metahistory,* however, his scholarship became explicitly engaged in literary and theoretical issues, as he responded to critics from the disciplines of both history and literature. His book *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) examines the structuring role of plots and tropes (figures of speech) in the

discourse of history. *The Content of Form* explores the contemporary interplay between narrative theory and history in the work of both historians such as Michel Foucault and literary theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Paul Ricoeur. And in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999), White takes on mimesis-the representation of reality-in history, an issue that has concerned literary critics from Plato to Erich Auerbach.

Hayden White has been in the vanguard of the movement among historians, starting in the 19805, that has come to be known as the "new cultural history." Historians associated with the movement, such as Lynn Hunt, Thomas Laqueur, and, in France, Roger Chartier, began to question the methods and goals of history in general, many turning to literary techniques and approaches to develop new materials and methods of analysis. The influences on this group of historians are varied. They include cultural Marxist approaches developed in the 1980s by British scholars such as E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, as well as the French Annales School founded in the late 1920s by the historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. The new cultural history has also been strongly influenced by the work of Foucault, by literary theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin, and, of course, by White himself. Many of the historians associated with the new cultural history have ties with literary practitioners of the New Historicism and cultural studies.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Write in short about the critical reception of Hayden White.



9.7 LET US SUM UP

As we come to the end of this unit, we have learnt that Hayden White reacted against the tendency of history as a discipline to seek its models in the sciences. Instead, he contends that the literary dimension of history cannot be dismissed as mere decoration; rather, historians deploy

the traditional devices of narrative to make sense of raw data, to organize and give meaning to their accounts of the past. He sought to bring the tools of the literary critic to bear on historical writing. White's analyses are powerful extensions of narrative theory for students like us as well as scholars of literature interested in understanding the nature and mechanisms of history as discourse.

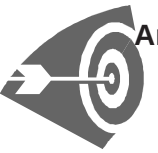


9.8 FURTHER READING

Leitch, Vincent B. (Ed.). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* New York. W. W. Norton & Company.

Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books.

9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (Hints Only)



Ans to Q 1: White's book *Metahistory* outlines an ambitious structuralist scheme for describing a "poetics of history.".. …for this, he drew on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to describe the underlying "deep structure" of historical narratives… …his project brings together historiography and literary criticism in a broad reflection on narrative and its relation to culture.

Ans to Q 2: Because, the sequence of events they record are selected from the historical data, and plot structures are imposed upon them into a comprehensible narrative which is told as a particular kind of story.

Ans to Q 3: By 'emplotment', White means the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with "fictions" in general… …stories take their shape from what White calls "emplotment," the process through which the facts contained in "chronicles" are encoded as components of plots.

Ans to Q 4: He insisted that the historian was above all a storyteller and suggested that historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of "facts" which, in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all.

Ans to Q 5: History can be set over against science by virtue of its want of conceptual rigor and failure to produce the kinds of universal laws that the sciences characteristically seek to produce… …history can be set over against literature by virtue of its interest in the "actual" rather than the "possible," which is supposedly the object of representation of "literary" works.

Ans to Q 6: Metahistory addresses itself to such questions as, What is the structure of a peculiarly *historical* consciousness? What is the epistemological status of historical *explanations,* as compared with other kinds of explanations that might be offered to account for the materials with which historians ordinarily deal? What are the possible *forms* of historical representation? What authority can historical accounts claim as contributions to a secured knowledge of reality in general and to the human sciences in particular? etc.

Ans to Q 7: Because history, like literature, is a verbal structure and the historian is a also writer… …the tools that have served literary critics, the tools that compose the linguistic and rhetorical structures of a text, serve the historian well… …the language in which history is written cannot be dismissed as window dressing, as most historians are tempted to do.

Ans to Q 8: Historians have objected to White's narrowing of history to language… … poststructuralist critics have taken issue with White's structuralist reductionism… …some critics argue that Frye's archetypal approach to narrative which White relies on, is too simple, forcing all narratives willy-nilly into abstract and timeless structures without regard to how they might function in particular cultural contexts.



9.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a note on Hayden White's ideas of history and history writing.

Q 2: Discuss the contributions of Hayden White in the context of literary and critical theory.

Q 3: Hayden White argued that historical writing was influenced by literary writing in many ways. Discuss.

Q 4: Historical narratives are verbal fictions supported by philosophical theories of history that seek to validate their plots. Discuss.

Q 5: Write a note on the reception Hayden White as a historian who sought to establish the 'poetics of history'.

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UNIT 10: WALTER BENJAMIN: "THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION"

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Walter Benjamin: Life and Works

10.4 Reading the Text: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

10.4.1 Major Themes

10.4.2 Style and Language

10.5 Critical Reception of Benjamin

10.6 Let us Sum up

10.7 Further Reading

10.8 Answers to Check Our Progress (Hints Only)

10.9 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the essayist Walter Benjamin
- explain the context of the prescribed essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"
- highlight the major themes that emerge from the text of the essay
- analyse the style and language employed by Benjamin in his writings
- gain an idea on the critical reception of Benjamin's work

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" written by Walter Benjamin. This essay is an essay of cultural criticism, which proposes that the *aura* of a work of art is devalued by mechanical reproduction. The subject and themes of the essay

have substantially influenced the fields like art history, architectural theory, cultural studies and media theory. Benjamin who was a German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic and essayist, made lasting contributions to aesthetic theory, literary criticism and historical materialism. He was also associated with the Frankfurt School, and remained informed about the thinkers including the playwright Bertolt Brecht. Benjamin wrote this essay during the Nazi régime (1933–1945) in Germany, to produce a theory of art that is "useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art" in mass culture. He also held the view that in the age of mechanical reproduction and the absence of traditional and ritualistic values, the production of art would be inherently based upon the praxis of politics. As we finish reading this unit, we shall be able to discuss the important aspects of the essay in sufficient details.

10.3 WALTER BENJAMIN: THE ESSAYIST

Benjamin was not only a well-known philosopher but was also a cultural critic and essayist. Before we delve into the text of the essay in a detailed manner, let us gain a glimpse into the life and the literary contributions of the renowned philosopher in the introductory subsection.

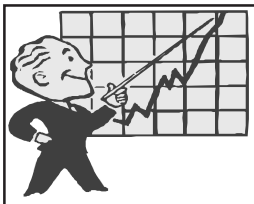
Walter Benjamin was raised in a prosperous Jewish family by his guardians, Emil Benjamin and Pauline Schonflies in Berlin, Germany. He was born in the year 1892, as the eldest of two siblings named Georg and Dora, first attending school at the Kaiser Friedrich School in 1902 before joining a boarding school known as Hermann-Lietz-SchuleHaubinda from 1905-1906. Following these two years, he decided to return to his old school where he had completed his early education. Benjamin went on to pursue his higher studies at the University of Freiburg again returning home to finally complete his studies in Philosophy from the University of Berlin.

Walter Benjamin's chosen discipline had opened up his worldviews and his special interests in the philosophy of religion, with growing interests in Judaism, Zionismand an inclination towards the spiritual. He took interests in the lectures of the philosopher Herinrich Rickert and gradually, began to develop his own worldviews and sharpen his own intellect. As a young man,

he travelled to Italy and France, and had also met with poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Gershom Scholem at the University of Munich. He completed his postdoctoral studies at the University as well; having studied the topic entitled "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism". Given the range of his interests in areas such as German idealism, Romanticism and Western Marxism, he had forwarded his own perspectives that enriched literary theory to a great extent. Benjamin began translating a portion of *Fluers du Mal* by the famous French poet Charles Baudelaire in the year 1914 and later a volume of Marcel Proust's work titled- *In Search of Lost Time* (1924) into German with developing interests and deepening fascination for the works of Leo Strauss. Also, Benjamin joined and taught at the University of Heidelberg in the year 1929. He was married to Dora Sophie Pollak until the two separated ways in 1930 and also had a child named Stefan Rafael.

The learner may be interested to know that Benjamin was well-acquainted with the leading playwright Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukacs. He had also contributed his writings to *The Frankfurt Times and The Literary World* starting from the year 1926.Thus, some of the significant works by Walter Benjamin are namely: *Charles Baudelaire, Tableaux Parisiens* (1923), *Elective Affinities* (1924), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924), *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), *One Way Street* (1930), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1930) and the incomplete volume *The Arcades Project* (1927). The best known essays by Benjamin are- "The Task of the Translator" (1923), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) which has been taken up for study in this unit and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). Benjamin's life was not without its share of difficulties as a Jewish man, he had to constantly escape the clutches of the Nazi Forces, which had tragically prosecuted the Nazi Jews at that time under the dictates of Adolf Hitler who took over the German empire. Thus, Benjamin spent his time in exile at Ibiza, Spain and in Paris, as well where he came to be acquainted with his fellow German thinkers and intellectuals. The learner will be interested to know that Benjamin had also found refuge in the home of dramatist, Bertolt Brecht at

Svendborg during these difficult times. Finally, in a bid to escape the tortures of the Nazi forces, Benjamin took the drastic steps of taking his own life at Portbou in the year 1940.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the complete name of the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin?

Q 2: Where did Walter Benjamin first receive his formal education?

Q 3: Mention some of the significant works by Walter Benjamin

10.4 READING THE TEXT: "THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION"

In this subsection, we shall take up the prescribed essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"(1935) which was first published by Max Horkheimer in a journal for the Institute of Social Research. Let us then, gain a concise idea on the content of the essay through the summarised explanation of the text. The essay begins with a quotation by Paul Valery from the essay "Le Conquete de l'ubiquite" or "The Conquest of Ubiquity" which states that the fine arts that were established in the classical age or the "ancient craft of the beautiful" are bound to be different from that of the present context and that with the change in human perspectives and practices of the fine arts, it is necessary to be more accepting of the inevitable changes and transformations. According to Valery, we must "expect great innovations" in order to bring about changes in our own perceptions towards art as that is what shall make it progressive.

Although, the essay is lengthy, yet it is well divided into a short preface followed by fifteen subsections taking up various aspects on the core theme of mechanical reproduction of works of art, ending with an epilogue. The Preface begins with Benjamin's discussion on Karl Marx and the Marxist perspectives on the modes of production in a capitalist society, the status of art in such an economy and the exploitation of the working classes in the industrial economy. Benjamin mentions the suppressive role of the fascists who tend to impose their terms on the means of production have no

consideration or regard towards the aesthetic value of art or as he states the ideas of 'creativity', 'genius', 'eternal value' and 'mystery' (2). However, the same aspects are essential in the groundbreaking development with regard to the "politics of art".

The introductory subsection takes up the development of all works of art since the beginning of time, the establishment of formal traditions of the works of art and the role of the present day mechanical reproductions of art. With relevant examples, Benjamin cites the importance of mechanical reproduction and justifies its 'accuracy', as well as, 'efficiency' in reproducing works of art on a large scale. He highlights the earlier methods of manual reproduction that was practiced by the Ancient Greeks, the practices of woodcut relief painting, etching, engraving and lithography before the advent of photography, which is the more modern version of mechanical reproduction. Just as the art of lithography had inspired the idea of illustrated newspapers, the camera which was a quick and convenient way to capture images in fractions of a second had eventually inspired the production of sound films.

The second subsection discusses the fact that even the most perfect reproduction has a certain drawback with regard to its time and space. A work of art undergoes various changes such as physical condition or even in terms of the ownership. Moreover, the original work can possibly be determined through the process of chemical or physical examination and analysis. Thus, the presence of the original version or the traceability of an old work of art is necessary in determining its validity and authenticity. Therefore, Benjamin states that the "original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" and cites for an instance on how a chemical examination can establish the authenticity of the patina of a bronze or establish evidence that an archive of the fifteenth century is the source of a document belonging to the middle ages. The mechanical reproduction of an original work of art, however, alters its 'aura' or and a reproduction of a work of art loses out on its 'original charm'. Thus, he states, "[t]he situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated" (4).

The third subsection takes up the aspect of changes in the evolving interests of the masses towards works of art with the passage of time, which is only too inevitable. The sensibilities of people in general tend to undergo leaps of changes through the changing aspects of 'nature' and 'historical' contexts as he writes, "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence" (5). This brings into context the element of 'aura' with regard to historical objects. For an instance, imagine a summer afternoon with the distant mountains in sight capturing your attention and overwhelming you with the sheer power of its presence or in other words its aura. Aura is defined as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (5). It is the inherent human desire to bring all that is at a distance all the more closer that explains their efforts of mechanical reproductions of such works of art. Thus, he writes-"Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye" (5). It is therefore, a universal phenomenon so to say, that the aura of an object is not appreciated as it is done in its natural or original state, its captivating beauty or aura is extracted, even if in parts by means of reproductions of the same. Although, the essence of an original object or work of art can never really be extracted, yet reproduction precisely tries to get as close as it can to copy, resemble or take after an original piece of work. The impression of socio-cultural effects undoubtedly influences the reproduction of a work of art.

The fourth subsection takes up the uniqueness of a work of art which Benjamin states is "inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (6). For an instance, for the Greeks the ancient statue of Venus was an object of reverence and worship unlike the religious clerics in the Middle ages who considered the same statue as an idol (as they stood against idolatry). Nevertheless, the aspect of commonality of both the Greeks and the religious clerics is that they were undeniably engaged with the aura of the Goddess, regardless of whether they worshipped her or stood against such worship. Moreover, there is the related aspect of 'ritualisation' that

gives a work of art its due significance. In this regard, he writes thus, "…the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value."(6). Again, Benjamin in weighing the pros of 'mechanical reproduction' states that for the first time it became a means of 'emancipating' a work of art from its original state, of being an authority in itself by reproducing the same work of art and thereby, also freeing it from the "parasitical dependence" (6) of finding its basis in ritual. Thus, a work of reproduced art also came to mean that it was designed for further reproductions, an example being 'photographs' which could be easily developed from its negatives into end number of copies. With time, the divide between the private and the public came to be broken down as well, where the works of art created and kept within the private realm came to find a larger scope of representation for larger viewership in exhibitions.

Thus, Benjamin notes- "With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products" (7). In the prehistoric times, early forms of art gained its significance owing to its association with the magical, until art came to be oriented into formalised traditions and gained recognition. Man in the Stone Age drew figures of elk on the cave walls which were open for other men to look at, even as they were actually meant for personal purposes i.e., to ward off spirits. However, with time, works of art acquired a cult status, which also demanded that it should remain hidden from the public eye and this precisely explains the inaccessibility of certain statues of Gods or Goddesses by the masses. In many cases, the high priests and religious authorities exert their rights on their exclusive accessibility to these objects that acquire a cult status as he states, "Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level" (7). Again, given the advantages of reproductions, it is always easier to exhibit a bust of a statue as a work of art, which can be handled and transferred from one place to the other rather than exhibit an object of worship, which is considered to have a fixed place inside a religious or spiritual sanctuary. Similarly, the earlier forms of

'frescoes' or special paintings which donned the ceilings of cathedrals gave way to oil paintings which could be easily displayed in exhibitions and transported from place to place. Again, the impact of religious mass which was considerably powerful and influential on the public also made way for the equally powerful mode of musical or instrumental symphony, which in a way surpassed the earlier mode of reaching out to the masses of people.

In the sixth subsection, Benjamin takes up the aspect of photography in which the cult status of a work of art came to be replaced by the exhibition mode. Photography was preceded by portraits or paintings. Photography came to acquire a cult status as they captured the special moments and fond remembrances of the near and dear ones, the significant moments of one's life, as well as, the memories of the departed. These captured photographic images thus, came to form the vestiges of one's memories, which is what had made it so special. Here, he mentions the photography of Atget in the 1900s that was revolutionary in itself and which when analysed revealed not just the historical events but also implied the underlying political significance.

The seventh subsection highlights the debate of the nineteenth century, which examines on whether 'painting' or 'photography' had higher artistic value. With the coming of the mechanical age of reproduction, the cult status of art or its authority was broken down in a sense. Again, it came to be debated whether photography, which was a means of mechanical reproduction, was a work of art or not. In the eighth subsection, Benjamin analyses the artistic performance of stage actors and the functional role of the camera. The camera thus, becomes the roving lens and by means of its special camera angles, close ups and other such technical aspects. Thus, the performance of the actor is never free from the technical intervention of the camera, which is why he states "… the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests" (10). For this reason, the performance of an actor is through the medium of "optical tests" (10) and the filtering lens of the camera. Thus, he further states,

"This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experimenting any personal contact with the camera. The audience's

identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing" (10)

The ninth subsection, further discusses this aspect by highlighting the dramatist Luigi Pirandello's observations on how the actor undergoes a sort of transformation or "metamorphosis" (10) while acting and undergoing a screen test in front of the camera. With regard to the sound film, he quotes Pirandello on the actor's uneasy experience on stage and in front of the camera thus,

"The film actor feels as if in exile- exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort, he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence…The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera" (10).

He notes that while the stage actor tends to relate to the role that he or she portrays, the film actor is often deprived from that liberating experience. In the shooting of a film, the spontaneity or the flow of acting for the actor is continuously interrupted, as the acting scenes are broken and repeated into several takes and retakes of the same performance.

He notes that Pirandello on his observations as a dramatist noted that a stage plays or the theatre has its base in mechanical reproduction as the film. Also, the greatest of critics have noted that "the greatest effects are almost always obtained by 'acting' as little as possible" (11). In many ways then, an actor becomes a puppet or a prop that is placed as per convenience in the scheme of things. However, if a stage actor is compared to that of a film actor, it is found that while the former has scope to identify or relate to the role portrayed, the latter has little or no scope of doing the same. The stage or theatre actor performs live and thus there is a spontaneity in the acting. Now, as far as the film actor is concerned, his or her performance is composed of many parts or fragments that are composed to form a whole almost like a montage. There are several

concerns such as the expenses of studios, availability of co-actors, the designed sets to mention a few which breaks down the shooting of an entire film into many parts.

In the tenth subsection, Benjamin discusses the sense of estrangement or the "feeling of strangeness" (11) that effects the actor which Pirandello describes as similar to the strangeness that one experiences when facing his or her own image in the mirror. The image of the role portrayed is "transportable" (11) to the public and the actor is conscious of this fact all along. The actor knows that he or she is not just portraying a role that is recorded in the camera but also the public viewers to whom these performances are eventually transported to. Even as the actor gives in his or her heart and soul to these performances, as far as the market is concerned, it is not in the hands of the actor. This is compared to that of an article made in the factory, which has no role in its marketability. The problem that is identified herein is that not only the aura of the actor or rather the "cult of the movie star" (11) is subject to the finances involved but also to the development of a certain artifice or "spell of personality" (11) in place of aura. Benjamin notes that as long as the capital of movie makers continues to control the making of film, the credibility of films as the medium of revolutionary change in the society will be lacking in many ways, writing thus, "…a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art. We do not deny that in some cases today's films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property." (12)

Diverting a little from this aspect, Benjamin goes on to discuss how for centuries there were two distinct spaces, i.e., of the writers and that of the readers. However, towards the end of the 20th century, these spaces were seen to dissolve. He states the changing developments with regard to the reception and practice of literature thus, "Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property" (12). With the print media publishing and extensively covering the new socio-political, religious, scientific or professional issues and aspects together with the local developments for the readers. This had

in turn led to the enlightened readers taking up the pen and becoming writers themselves. At first they became the occasional writers writing letters to the editor in the dailies but with time, they (particularly, the employed Europeans) sought opportunities of publishing in some form or the other, whether work related aspects, grievances or complaints, documentary reports and the like. Owing to this, Benjamin writes,

"Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment, the reader is ready to turn into a writer. As expert, which he had to become willy nilly in an extremely specialized work process, even if it only in some minor respect, the reader gains access to authorship." (12)

Further, he extends the same phenomenon with regard to film, filmmaking and its changing equation with regard to its viewership as noted in the case of Russia and Western Europe in general.

The eleventh subsection takes up the aspect of film shooting, particularly that of a sound film and takes us behind the scenes, where in the studio, mechanical equipment take control over the entire projection of the film. There are various techniques that generally are used in filmmaking, one of the common forms being the use of specially adjusted cameras, mounting of shots etc. Here, Benjamin makes his observations thus, "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology" (13).

In the twelfth subsection, Benjamin takes up the aspect of how mechanical reproduction of art also alters the perspective of the masses. He notes that Picasso's painting will probably draw a reactionary response from the masses and perhaps disturb their aesthetic sensibilities, owing to the dramatic changes in artistic expression from that of the earlier conventions. While a movie like Charlie Chaplin which while presenting comedy at its best also reveals all the socially significant messages that depict the realities of a capitalist society and it is precisely this work of art that draws a progressive response of the audiences. Thus, he notes, "The progressive

reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert, such fusion is of great social significance" (14). Moreover, particularly in the case of a film the reaction of the mass audiences has an extensively controlling influence on individual reactions- "The moment these responses become manifest they control each other" (14), much unlike the case of a painting.

As far as paintings are concerned- it acquires a certain established reception after the passing of ages and centuries. For an instance in the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages, princely courts to the 18th century, a work of art i.e., a painting acquired layered meanings of the patrons and its limited viewers with the passing of time "by graduated and hierarchized mediation" (14) and not by immediate responses. It was much later that with the mechanical reproduction of such works of art that they came to be exhibited and viewed in galleries, salons and every other place.

The thirteenth subsection takes up the characteristics of the film and discusses certain aspects of psychoanalysis, which is a method of reading or even analysing the psychological state of the human mind that was first considered by the French psychologist Sigmund Freud. The human mind is considered to be pre-conditioned in a particular way and that meanings surface from our deeper level of consciousness. He opines that the film precisely provides a similar scope whereby we as audiences have now gained a sharper insight into the workings of the human mind. Thus, with the publication of the seminal work, *Psychology of Everyday Life,* the minute psychological aspects that earlier went unnoticed are now subject to the analysis of the viewers. Therefore, the nuances of human emotions, actions and expressions are now subject of our inquiry into the deeper realms of the human mind or in other words the human psyche. Thus, he notes,

"By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rile our lives; on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the

other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling" (16).

He cites the example of something as simple as a slow motion shot of a person walking which breaks up the entire walking movement in several fragments, thereby presenting the way in which the muscle operates in a minute way which only the camera shot can capture accurately rather than our naked eye. Therefore, the camera he opines, "introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (16).

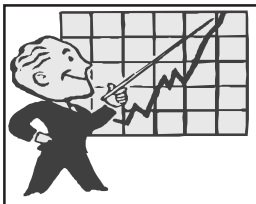
The fourteenth subsection, delves into the fact that one of the pressures on art has been the "creation of a demand" (16) whereby it almost amounts to a necessity so that a work of art can sustain itself with "a changed technical standard" (16) and the changing times. All the modern artistic movements came up with distinct appeal characterising the very temperament of the times for an instance the artistic movement of Dadaism that was radical in its day stemmed from the intellectual ferment of the modern times. It had a certain shock value in terms of the kind of art and literature that it had inspired, almost disturbing the sensibilities of people who were conventional in their perspectives as he notes, "Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the centre of scandal. One requirement was foremost" to outrage the public" (17). However, even as these works of art and literature pierced the consciousness of the modern public much like a 'bullet', it also presented newer modes of thinking and reasoning, gradually immersing the public in its fold. Again, while comparing a painting to a film, he notes that a painting image enables a viewer to be easily immersed in contemplation without being interrupted; however, a film with its continuously changing scenes interrupts the thought process of the viewer making it difficult to concentrate and demanding the presence of mind.

In the fifteenth section, which is also the final sub section of the essay, Benjamin takes up the opposite aspects of distraction and

concentration, which creates a tussle in the perception of the viewers. From the example of paintings and films, he moves on to discuss architecture, which he states has a longer history than that of any other art, being a "living force" even with the change of times. Then, he goes on to discuss the reception of the masses, regarding, which he writes,

"Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one" (19).

On a closing note in the Epilogue, Benjamin discusses how Fascism has resulted in the production of works of art, which provides the masses a means of expression within the limiting frame of the political aim and agenda. Therefore, he notes, "Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (19).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Who had first published the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"?

Q 5: What does the introductory lines of the essay reveal?

Q 6: Define the term 'aura' with regard to a work of art.

Q 7: Why did photography acquire a cult status when it first came about?

Q 8: What is the basic difference found in the role of a stage/ theatre or film actor?

Q 9: Highlight some of the changes that took place at the turn of the 20th century with the flourishing of the print media.

Q 10: What did Walter Benjamin opine regarding certain aspects of 'Psychoanalysis'? What scope does it provide to the viewer of films?

10.4.1 Major Themes

The following subsection takes up the emergent themes from the text of the essay as also discussed below. The learner may also add his or her own interpretation to the text of the same essay followed by a thorough reading of the text, thereby exercise, and enhance his or her own analysis of the essay.

Mechanical Reproduction:

Reproduction by mechanical means does considerably take away from the aura of a work of art, however it's necessity and importance cannot be denied as well. The essay is considerably important and draws together the fields of art history, architectural theory, film studies, cultural studies and mass studies. It was first written when the Nazis were in rule in Germany. Benjamin wrote the essay on this significant theme of mechanical reproduction of works of art as an attempt to conceive a theory of art, thereby examining certain aspects regarding the ways in which the masses react to works of art. By the term art, we may refer to all forms of art such as the fine arts, literature, sculpture, architecture, music, film, photography and other such works of art, which can also be mechanically reproduced. With the advent of film and photography, there has been a wave of change in our accessibility and perceptions towards various works of art. Benjamin notes that photograph as a reproduced work of art is twice removed from the original painting owing to which is no more 'authority' in the original work of art (given the fact that it can be easily reproduced). Further, he notes that the advantage of film is immense in the sense that it is a powerful means of projecting 'images', distracting our minds easily while also highlighting certain minute aspects of reality to the public eye.

With the opening up of the arts, several new modes and platforms of public reception has emerged- as a result of which the general masses have easy access to art exhibitions, films, theatre, museums, galleries etc. which considerably opens up public access

to all works of art. However, according to Benjamin, much of the originality of a work of art or 'aura' inconsiderably worn out with widespread availability or public access. Do you not agree with the saying that 'familiarity breeds contempt'? Anything that is easily accessible to human perception tends to lose out on the value or worth that a work of art is accorded with. Thus, in this regard, Benjamin delves into certain minute aspects such as- aura, cult-ritual status, the diminishing of authority in relation to 'works of art' and their widespread 'reproductions', in order to probe or examine how these are critically received and the ways in which the cultural meanings and other markers are ascribed to the same.

Comparative Role of an Artist:

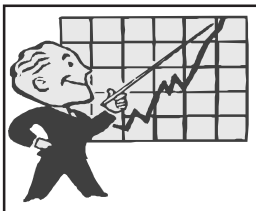
In his discussion on art, Benjamin sketchily discusses the role or function of an artist. For an instance, in the essay, he notes that similarities can be traced in the magician, the surgeon, the painter and the camera operator, and thereby be compared to each other. In the example that he cites, the 'magician' who heals and the 'surgeon' who operates are not much different from each other. While the magician establishes a connection with the patient by placing his hands on the head or the body in order to heal on a one-to-one basis, the surgeon is relatively distant from the patient as he equips himself or herself and penetrates the body from a distance with surgical instruments. While the painter comes up with a painting which is one whole work of art by itself, the cameraman comes up with multiple images in fragments recorded in the camera that are later combined to form one whole completed picture or work of art. According to Benjamin, however, it is the film that is more significant or rather relevant as a work of art to the contemporary man than a painting, as it portrays social realities which thematically or in terms of content is free from the technicalities of reproduction.

Politicisation of Art:

Art is also open to both 'covert' means, as well as, 'overt' means of politicisation, irrespective of whether it is positive or

negative in its impact. Here, covert politicisation refers to the politics that takes place in a concealed or unacknowledged manner and overt politicisation refers to politics that is apparent or the presence of which is acknowledged. The reproduced and the reproducibility of a work of art as discussed earlier, makes it all the more vulnerable to 'questions', as well as,(continuous) 'changes 'in perceptions. Benjamin thus, takes into account the question on what politicised and reproduced art means in the modern times.

According to Benjamin, it is the tussle of the old and new, as well as, the 'revolutionary' that ultimately results in raising the bar of aesthetics, inviting newer ways of producing creative works of art. This is the only way that dialectical history of art-works can be achieved or else there shall be no growth or progress of the same. For the same reason, if the learner goes through the epilogue of the essay, he or she will find that Benjamin makes a statement towards the tail end of the essay thus, "Communism responds by politicizing art" (20) or that there is an extensive political intervention in every work of art in the modern day. Walter Benjamin was conscious of the Marxist aspects with regard to the status of art in the capitalistic mode of production, taking into account the means of production or the ideologies involved in this regard, it is certain that he opened up the essay to questions of the 'politics' that engages and envelopes any work of art through the changing times and the opposing forces through which 'Art' continues to develop.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: What are some of the academic disciplines that the essay takes into account?

Q 12: What according to Benjamin raises the bar of aesthetics?

10.4.2 Style and Language

Walter Benjamin's literary works have undergone many translations particularly in English. He had brought into fore the concerns of technology and the media that had brought about a revolution in culture. As a philosopher and a thinker, he was very sharp and observant, being an intellectual in his own right. In his review article in *The American Reader*, Ben Mauk notes the range of subjects that Walter Benjamin wrote on stating thus,

"His range of subjects was no less unprecedented: in addition to epochal pieces on Kafka, Baudelaire, and Goethe, he wrote treatises on radio and film (including his famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"); arguments concerning the philosophy of language; dreary accounts of his childhood; exponential travelogues and "city portraits", radio plays; fairy tales; and essays on his experience with everything from children's books to gambling, [smut] and drugs. He was among the first workers to take "popular culture" seriously as an object of study. At the same time, he cultivated his role as a curator, rather than interpreter."

While reading through the writings of Benjamin particularly the text of the prescribed essay, the learner will note that he makes several cross-references in terms of works and intellectual ideas of other thinkers on the area of discussion i.e., the work of art and mechanical reproduction. The essay is presented in a structured manner which takes up one aspect after the other in anorganised manner, as you may have also noticed in the text of the essay or the explanation of the text provided in the earlier subsection of this unit. It is relatively easy to grasp the ideas that Benjamin highlights in the essay and to pin point the ideas that he tries to get across to the discerning reader. However, it is not to say that the ideas that are presented in the essay are all too simplistic and easy. In fact, they are loaded with minute observations and these also provide scope

for further discourse and debate with regard to mechanical reproductions of art and the status of art in the modern age. The interesting aspect of his essay is that Benjamin also elucidates his statements and provides ample examples to illustrate his views and critical analysis of the discourse that he presents.

His style of writing is scholarly, coherent and precise. The prescribed essay is undoubtedly one of Benjamin's most influential works so far which further explains its relevance across various academic disciplines. In addition, it may be noted that the widely available text of the essay is in translation and therefore, there is bound to be slight differences in terms of language and expression. However, it is important to note that considering the close translation of Benjamin, the essay is presented in a discursive, detailed and conversational manner almost as if it were his co-scholar to whom he presents his views and perspectives. The presentation of ideas in the essay in a way tends to take for granted that the reader may not necessarily be well versed in the area of discussion. For the same reason, the learner is advised to also follow the footnotes available in some of the translations of the same text, which will provide him or her an inkling, or even a vague idea of the frequent cross references that Benjamin makes in his essay.

10.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BENJAMIN

Jeffrey Grossman in assessing the critical reception of Walter Benjamin discusses how the Marxists and deconstructionist critics had interpreted and had also drawn extensively from his work on art in the mechanical age noting thus, "In the last twenty years, debate about the meaning of Walter Benjamin's writings has exploded in a vast production of articles and books in the academic institution, and especially in the areas of literary and cultural theory" (414). Further, Ben Mauk in tracing the development of Walter Benjamin's intellectual writings and discourses also mention one of the noteworthy works by the scholars Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (who have extensively worked on the philosopher)

titled 'The Name of the Critic: On "Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life"', delve into the biographical details and also provide a comprehensive study on the influential writings of the philosopher.

There are several versions of the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", the first being the German edition published in 1935 with a long title 'Das Kunstwerhim Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit'. This was followed by the French edition published in 1936 and the Revised edition of 1939. From which the English translations were done. Benjamin was highly influenced by the Frankfurt School and the intellectual views of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkhemier and Herbert Marcuse. The essay examines what the work of art means in the modern context and in the contemporary time. Thus, artistic reproduction cuts into the aesthetic, cultural and political authority of art- "For the first time ever, images of art become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valuable, free" as it is no more surrounded by the aura that surrounded a work of art earlier.

As mentioned in the essay, the popular French phrase- *L'artpour'l'art* which is translated as 'Arts for Art's sake' is a French slogan that dates back to the 19th century that emphasises on the fact that a work of art is delineated from didactic, moral or utilitarian functions. This concept was brought forth by Theophile Gautier in his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Those like John Rustin and the later communists (who supported socialist realism) - held that art was to serve moral or didactic purposes. The communists who believed in socialist realism idealised realistic art whereby socialist or communist values were projected through realistic imagery that was practiced in Soviet Union from the early 1920s until the late 1960s and late 80s. They stood against the mushrooming of popular culture. They were thus, limiting or restrictive in a sense, as they privileged everyday realities which were more comprehensible and to which the proletariats could easily relate. Art was no more meant for aesthetic pleasure alone- it had higher agendas to serve which was its primary purpose. Therefore, the appreciation of art for its own sake was relegated to the background.

Some of the important groups in this regard were the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AARR). It is debated even by contemporary writers and intellectuals on whether art should be for the sake of art alone or not but it was adopted by many like Walter Pater, Charles Baudelaire, Stefan George among others. According to Benjamin, the phrase 'art for art's sake' is rather extends to a "theology of art" (6). Even the Futurists (those associated with the futurist movement in art and culture) believed in the phrase '*Fiat arspereat mundus'*- that translates as- 'let wit be created, though the world perish'. Many like Diego Riveria opine that this belief could create a deeper split between the poor and the rich, as pure and refined art would only cater to the elite few or the privileged and thereby, repress the importance of its social responsibility. Further, the Communist leader, Mao Zedong had opined that it was necessary to produce art, which was not just meant for art's sake, but the kind that took into account the larger interests or the welfare of the proletariat.



10.6 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit on the German-Jewish thinker and prolific writer, Walter Benjamin and the prescribed essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", we have gained a fair idea on the philosopher's eventful life, as well as, his literary contributions. As the unit provides a concise explanation on the content of the rather lengthy essay, it also highlights the themes that emerge from the text, as well as, the style and language employed by Benjamin in his writing. Also, by this time, we must have gained a fair idea on the critical reception of his work. Thus, the unit will enable the learner to engage himself or herself critically and enjoy the text of the essay, which is also considered a seminal essay by Walter Benjamin written in eloquent and a reader-friendly manner. However, we should go through the text of the essay in order to gain a better comprehension of the prescribed text.



10.7 FURTHER READING

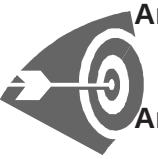
Atendt, Hannah. (1969). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin. Trans. Harry John in *Illustrations*. New York: Schocken Books.

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10.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (Hints Only)



Ans to Q 1: The complete name of Walter Benjamin is Walter Bendix Schonflies Benjamin.

Ans to Q 2: Walter Benjamin first began his formal education at the Kaiser Friedrich School in 1902 before joining a boarding school known as Hermann-Lietz-SchuleHaubinda from 1905-1906. Following these two years, he decided to return to his old school where he had completed his early education. Benjamin went on to pursue his higher studies at the University of Freiburg again returning home to finally complete his studies in Philosophy from the University of Berlin.

Ans to Q 3: Some of the significant works by Walter Benjamin are namely: *Charles Baudelaire, Tableaux Parisiens* (1923), *Elective Affinities* (1924), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924), *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), *One Way Street* (1930), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1930) and the incomplete volume *The Arcades Project* (1927).

Ans to Q 4: The essay was first published by Max Horkheimer in a journal for the Institute of Social Research.

Ans to Q 5: The essay begins with a quotation by Paul Valery from the essay "Le Conquete de l'ubiquite" or "The Conquest of Ubiquity" which states that the fine arts that were established in the classical age or the "ancient craft of the beautiful" are bound to be different from that of the present context and that with the change in human perspectives and practices of the fine arts, it is necessary to be more accepting of the inevitable changes and transformations. According to Valery, we must "expect great innovations" in order to bring about changes in our own perceptions towards art as that is what shall make it progressive.

Ans to Q 6: Aura is defined as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (5). It is the inherent human desire to bring all that is at a distance closer in perspective, which also explains the efforts of mechanical reproductions of various works of art.

Ans to Q 7: Photography came to acquire a cult status as they captured the special moments and fond remembrances of the near and dear ones, the significant moments of one's life, as well as, the memories of the departed. These captured photographic images thus, came to form the vestiges of one's memories, which is what had made it so special.

Ans to Q 8: If a stage actor is compared to that of a film actor, it is found that while the former has scope to identify or relate to the role portrayed, the latter has little or no scope of doing the same. The stage or theatre actor performs live and thus there is spontaneity in the acting.

Ans to Q 9: With the print media, publishing and extensively covering the new socio-political, religious, scientific or professional issues and aspects together with the local developments for the readers. This had in turn led to the enlightened readers taking up the pen and becoming writers and critics themselves.

Ans to Q 10: Walter Benjamin discusses certain characteristics of the film and certain aspects of psychoanalysis, which is a method of reading or rather analysing the psychological state of the human mind that was first considered by the French psychologist Sigmund Freud. The

human mind was considered to be pre-conditioned in a particular way and that 'meanings' essentially surfaced from our deeper level of consciousness. Benjamin opines that the film precisely provides a similar scope whereby we as audiences have now gained a sharper insight into the workings of the human mind.

Ans to Q 11: The essay draws together the fields of art history, architectural theory, film studies, cultural studies and mass studies.

Ans to Q 12: According to Benjamin, it is the tussle of the old and new, as well as, the 'revolutionary' that ultimately results in raising the bar of aesthetics, inviting newer ways of producing creative works of art.



10.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the life and works of the philosopher Walter Benjamin.

Q 2: Explain the text of the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Q 3: What are some of the emergent themes of the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"?

Q 4: Discuss the style and language employed by Walter Benjamin in his essay.

Q 5: Give a critical reception of the Walter Benjamin's work and his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

*** ***** ***



REFERENCE LIST (FOR ALL UNITS)

Atendt, Hannah. (1969). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin. Trans. Harry John in *Illustrations*. New York: Schocken Books.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Purloined_Letter

Name of the Paper:
Course Code:

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Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your experiences and comments so as to improve the quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking the relevant box that most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page and send/hand the same to us at the address given below.

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(It would be helpful if you could fill in the following questions also)

1. Approximately how many hours did you spend for studying the units in the course?
2. Please give your comments (for 1 months) in the following space based on your reading of the Block

Sl. No.	Statement(s)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I.	The TITLE of the course/ SLM has learning objectives set out at the beginning of each unit					
II	The unit of the SLM could satisfy my academic needs and expectations					
III.	The Unit reviews have excellent knowledge about the course contents					
IV	Language and contents of the units were presented in a way which I could easily understand					
V.	Ample opportunity for participation in the activities provided in the units					
VI	I have enough Educational Objectives which I have completed the SLM					
VII	Quality of Content is engaging, relevant and up-to-date					
VIII	The self check questions in the SLM I					
IX	The Study Materials assistance and the answers to check my progress have benefited me a lot					

Additional Comments (Please feel free to provide your open comments)

1. Which aspects of the SLM, according to you, worked well?

   _____

   _____

2. What are the changes/improvements do you feel REQUIRED (could implement to improve the overall quality of the SLM)?

   _____

   _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this form.

Name (Optional)