

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 20
Poststructuralism: Michel Foucault

Hello and welcome back to yet another lecture on literary theory. And today we will be continuing with our discussion on poststructuralism. And we will be doing so by focusing on the writings of Michel Foucault. Now we have already seen how the linguistic turn by the time it reaches post structuralist scholars like, Roland Barthe starts getting a political tone a political nuance, and we also found this political nuance informing Derridas strategy of deconstruction for instance. But the political texture of language use was perhaps best explored by Michel Foucault. And it was best exemplified by Michel Foucaults analysis of discourse.

It is this concept of discourse that will form our central preoccupation in today's lecture, but before we move on to the concept of discourse and it is relation to power politics let us familiarize ourselves with some biographical details about Foucault.

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Michel Foucault
(1926-1984)



Source: Owlcation

Now Michel Foucault was born in 1926 in Poitiers in France, mainland France. And he was educated in such prestigious institutes of higher education in Paris like, Ecole Normale Supérieure, and also the University of Sorbonne. He held several diplomatic

posts across the world before returning to academics as a teacher. And his longest association was with the college de France; where he was a professor of history of systems of thought. Now, Foucault was also sadly one of the earliest victims of AIDS in France. And he died in 1984 at the age of 57.

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• *Folie et Dérison* (1961)

It has variously been translated in English as *The History of Madness* and *Madness and Civilization*.

His book titled *Folie et Dérison*, whose title has actually been translated variously in English as the history of madness or as madness and civilization, established Foucault's reputation as one of the major intellectuals in the early 1960's, and this reputation grew with almost every subsequent publication like; the birth of the clinic, the order of discourse, the archaeology of knowledge, discipline and punish the history of sexuality.

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- *The Birth of the Clinic*
- *The Order of Discourse*
- *The Archaeology of Knowledge*
- *Discipline and Punish*
- *The History of Sexuality*

And these are the titles that I just mentioned these are just some of the more well-known works which were published during his lifetime. You need a large collection of his lectures delivered in college de France are still in the process of being compiled and published in the form of a series. And therefore, for the academic world at large Foucault's writings still remained living archive.

Like his contemporary Jacques Derrida Foucault is a wonderfully eclectic scholar if you read his writings, you will be amazed by the kind of eclecticism the kind of variety that you find there. And like Derrida he too put forward a number of novel ideas which are now in use in various different academic fields like; philosophy, literary studies, history of sciences, sociology and so on and so forth. But then like in our lecture on Derrida, we would not try to arrive at a comprehensive picture of all of these ideas. Because given the time restriction, the result will only be a superficial understanding of Foucault.

What we would do is, we would rather approach Foucault as a post structuralist; which means that we will primarily focus on those aspects of Foucault, which directly relates to the discussion on things like the author, text and language; which we had initiated with our lecture on Ferdinand de Saussure. I think the best way to see how Foucault built on the structuralist slash post structuralist tradition, while simultaneously critiquing it is to start with his 1969 essay, titled what is an author.

Now, if you remember our lecture on Barthe, you will know that Barthe had famously announced the death of the author as a subject who stands outside the text and pours meaning into it. Because for Barthe who was working along the lines of structuralism, language that formed a text was a self-contained structure whose meaning making process depended upon the internal relations of its constituent parts.

The author as far as Barthe is concerned is a Burgua fiction. And Derrida 2 as we saw in our previous lecture worked with the assumption that there is no external author figure who acts as a transcendental signified, and who fixes the meaning within the language of a text. While himself remaining above and beyond the text, and indeed Derrida argued that the absence of such an author figure of such a transcendental signified who can fix the meaning of signifiers within a text actually results in an interminable interplay of meanings; which he referred through the novel concept of difference.

Now, Foucault in his turn approaches the issue of author and authorship through a completely different lens, through a completely different question that he poses. And the question is, that even if we agree that the author as a subject is merely a Burgua fiction, then why is such a fiction necessary? In other words, if the author is required as a concept within certain specific socio cultural and political milieus, then what guides that requirement, even more simply put, why do we need the author? Foucault answers this question by first noting the fact that the name of the author represents a special kind of a proper noun; which incorporates 2 different functions.

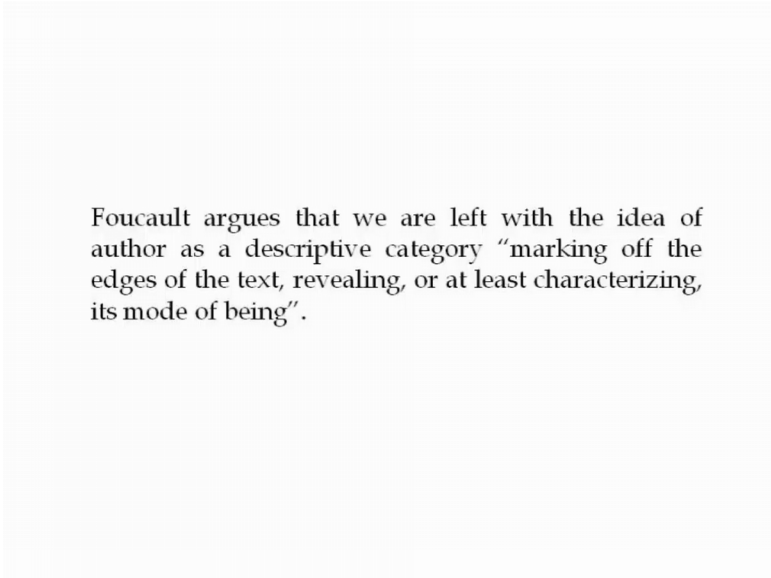
The first function is of designation, and the second function is of description. So, the function of designation for instance is something that the authors name shares with any other proper name. For instance, my name is Sayan. And whenever that name is uttered, it amounts to a gesture; it amounts to a pointing of finger towards me, the human subject right. Similarly, if I say William Shakespeare that name too will function as a gesture which points to a specific human subject who existed as a real historical figure at a particular time and a particular place; when people like Barthe and Derrida questioned the relationship between the author and the text, what they were doing was that they were questioning the existence or I should say the relevance of this real historical figure, as far as the meaning making process of the text is concerned.

But even if we set this designative function of the authors name aside, we are faced as Foucault shows us with the idea of author as a descriptive category. In other words, if we refer to the author William Shakespeare for instance what we have in mind is not simply the identity of a person, but also a description of a particular body of writing.

This understanding of the author William Shakespeare as a descriptive category, for instance will change if we come to know that the sonnets that goes under the authorship of Shakespeare, the cluster of sonnets which are attributed to Shakespeare; are actually poems written by someone else. And in that case even if the real historical person designated by the name of William Shakespeare remains the same, our understanding of the author William Shakespeare is bound to change.

So, even if we do not concern ourselves with the presence of a real historical person standing prior to the text and claiming to be it is author; Foucault argues that we are nevertheless left with this idea of author as a descriptive category, and I quote from Foucault.

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Foucault argues that we are left with the idea of author as a descriptive category “marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being”.

Marking of the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing it is mood of being. Now this descriptive aspect of the author is therefore, distinct from an independent of the idea of author as a subject.

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The descriptive aspect of the author is distinct from and independent of the idea of author as a subject, and to make this distinction clear Foucault refers to this descriptive aspect of authorship as the “author function”.

And to make this distinction clear Foucault refers to this descriptive aspect of authorship as the author function. Now note here that whereas, the author as a human subject stands outside the language or discourse of his text, the author function is integral to the textual discourse, and actually emerges from within it.

To understand this let us understand some of the features that Foucault ascribes to the author function; when we approach the name of William Shakespeare as an author function for instance, what it allows us to do is to identify a group of text as a single coherent and connected category. And it does so in at least 4 different ways.

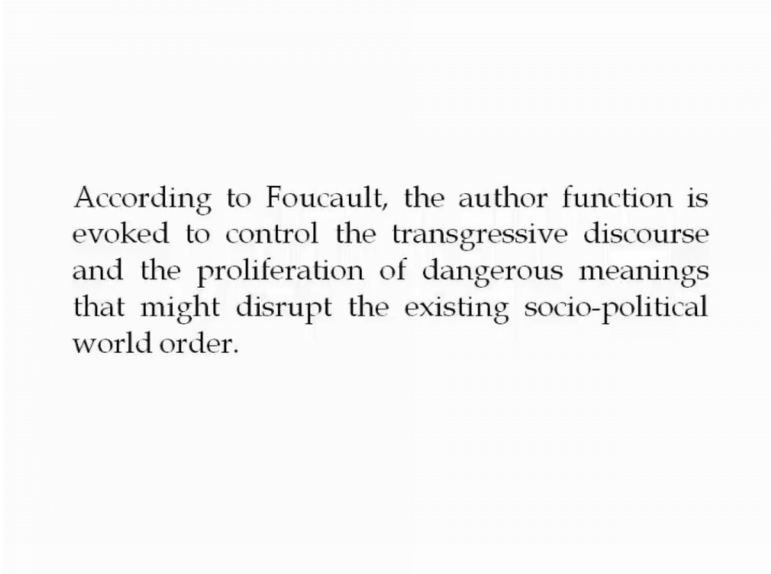
For instance, if we were to judge whether a particular piece of writing belongs to the category of Shakespeare’s work or not, we try and see whether its literary value matches with the other works that are known or that are ascribed traditionally to Shakespeare. And in this the assumption is that the name Shakespeare represents a constant level of literary value.

We also see if the particular piece of writing under consideration coheres with the doctrines professed in their writings that are otherwise attributed to Shakespeare or not. And in this we assume that the name of the author in this case Shakespeare, represents a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence. Thirdly, we also note while judging whether a piece can be ascribed to Shakespeare or not, whether it matches with the stylistic conventions that are otherwise followed in Shakespearean works.

And here our assumption is that the name of the author signifies a stylistic unity. And finally, we also see if the piece that we are considering falls within the time span in which other Shakespearean works were produced. And here the assumption is that the name of the author signifies a particular time period; which brackets a specific set of social political and economic events. And therefore, the work needs to either reflect them or be informed by those events.

So, as you can see the author function provides a way of clubbing together a set of texts and as such depends on the features of the discourse present within these texts. So now, that we have identified Foucault's author as author function rather than a human subject. Let us return to the original question. Why do we need the author? And here of course, by author I mean author function.

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According to Foucault, the author function is evoked to control the transgressive discourse and the proliferation of dangerous meanings that might disrupt the existing socio-political world order.

Foucault argues that we need the author because we as a society fear the proliferation of meaning. His fear of proliferation of meaning can be quite clearly seen for instance in the distinction that every society makes between discourses or utterances that are allowed, and discourses that are regarded as transgressive.

According to Foucault, the author function is evoked to control the transgressive discourses and the proliferation of dangerous meanings that might disrupt the existing socio political world order. And to understand this through an example, let us take the story of Mansur Al-Hallaj.

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Mansur Al-Hallaj
(858 – 922)



Source: Wikipedia

Now, Al-Hallaj was a Persian Sufi saint of the late 9th and early 10th century, and he is best known for his utterance *Ana al-haqq*. Now in Arabic, this phrase *Ana al-haqq* literally translates into I am the truth. But the word *al haqq* in the Quran is used as one of the names of Allah. So, the phrase *Ana al-haqq* can also be understood as meaning I am Allah.

Now, this second understanding of the phrase *Ana al haqq* can in turn be interpreted in 2 very different ways. So, for instance the first interpretation can be that the person uttering the phrase *Ana al haqq* is claiming to be Allah himself. The other interpretation that one might derive from this phrase is that the person uttering the phrase *Ana al haqq* is speaking about renouncing his ego, and dissolving his individual identity into the greater identity of Allah. So, as you can see here the same piece of discourse has a potential to create a profusion of meanings. If a free play of the meaning making process is allowed.

Now, some of these meanings that this limitless play might generate can be positively dangerous within specific socio political milieus. Thus, for instance the interpretation that one who utters the phrase *Ana al haqq* is actually claiming himself to be the almighty Allah was absolutely scandalous when articulated within the Theo centric Abbasid caliphate of the tenth century when Al-Hallaj was living. Now, according to Foucault the author function is needed to control this dangerous potentiality inherent in the limitless profusion of meanings. Does the author function can be evoked to cancel

out certain possible meanings of an utterance? By stating for instance, that such a meaning is not consistent with the doctrines professed in other texts marked by the name of the same author.

Alternatively, the author can be held guilty of uttering a transgressive discourse and be punished for that. So, for instance in the tenth century Abbasid caliphate, Mansur Al-Hallaj was actually condemned as a *zindiq* or an apostate and was sentenced to a very painful and gruesome death. Now this punishment meted out by the caliph did not simply kill off the person designated by the proper name Mansur Al-Hallaj, but also suppressed the entire category of discourse that was described by the author function indicated by the name Mansur Al-Hallaj.

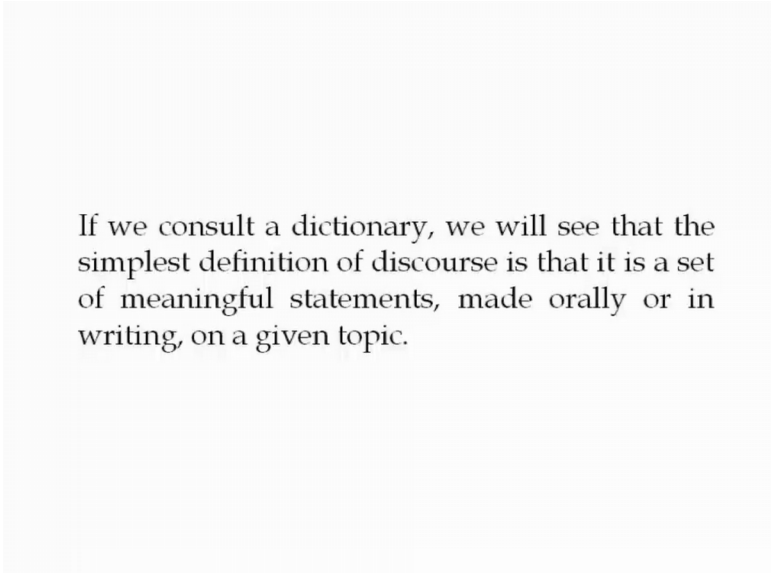
This is because all the potentially subversive meanings of the phrase *Ana al haqq* was erased by marking the author of that phrase as an apostate; that is, a person who has abandoned religion and therefore, is not in a position to utter any meaningful discourse on the subject of god.

In other words, the execution of Al-Hallaj was not simply the killing of a person, but also an attempt to stop the proliferation and circulation of meanings made possible by the utterance *Ana al haqq*. Now, I have presented here a very selective reading of Foucault's essay *What is an author*, and if you find some of the arguments that I have mentioned here to be interesting, then I would definitely recommend that you go and read the full text of the essay, it is really a very interesting piece. But even with the selective reading that we have in front of us, I would like to point out to you how Foucault intervenes into the field of structuralism post structuralism by introducing the aspect of political power.

So, in our lectures on Barthe and Derrida, we had seen how a language structure can produce an infinity of meaning. But what Foucault tells us through his elaboration on the need for the author function is that this infinity of meaning within any particular social milieu is limited by a political power structure. As the story of Mansur Al-Hallaj shows, there are ways in which certain discourses are regularly suppressed or denied meaning within a particular society. Indeed, a Foucault provides a wonderful exploration of how the meaning making process is controlled and limited to allow only certain socially and politically sanctioned meanings to finally emerge. In the remaining part of this lecture, we will focus on this particular act of Foucault's scholarship.

Now, some of you might have noticed that in this lecture on Foucault. I have been repeatedly using the word discourse, and as I mentioned in my introduction discourse forms a very crucial part of Foucault's writings. But discourse is also a very commonly used word. Yet, when we encounter this word in the writings of Foucault, we encounter it in a very specialized sense. So, in order to understand Foucault's theory about how the meaning making process underlying a discourse is limited and controlled within a specific socio political milieu let us try first to understand the word discourse in its most simplest and mundane form, and then we will gradually build up from there.

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If we consult a dictionary, we will see that the simplest definition of discourse is that it is a set of meaningful statements, made orally or in writing, on a given topic.

So, if you consult a dictionary, you will see that a dictionary defines discourse as a set of meaningful statements; meaningful statements which might be made orally but also which might appear in a written form and they can be meaningful statements on any given topic. So, again the simplest definition of discourse that you will find in a dictionary is that, a discourse is a set of meaningful statements made orally or in writing on any particular given topic. And this means that in the language of structuralism with which we have now developed a familiarity discourse means something like a parole; that is a concrete piece of language use.

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The insight that Michel Foucault brings to this simple definition of discourse is that there are certain deep-seated regulations which structure and limit the creation and circulation of discourses.

Foucault claims that there are certain deep seated regulations; which structure and limits the creation and circulation of discourses. And here I am not talking about the structuring principle of lung, because even while following the structure in principle of lung, we can theoretically say or write an infinite number of things. But what Foucault says is that though this might be possible in theory this infinity, in practice the number of meaningful statements that we can make is actually strictly limited by certain factors.

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Foucault in his essay "The Order of Discourse" discusses three factors that shape discourses:

- taboo
- madness/sanity
- institutional ratification

And Foucault in his essay the order of discourse discusses 3 such factors namely, taboo, madness and sanity, and institutional ratification. And we will look at each of these factors one by one, and we will start with the notion of taboo.

Now, in any society at any given point of time, there are always prohibitions surrounding certain topics. And these topics, these prohibited topics are regarded as taboos. And any discussion on these topics are therefore, socially looked down upon.

And consequently there is an absence of discourse on certain topics within certain social milieus. In the example of Al-Hallaj that we have just discussed, speaking about oneself as god as a topic was considered to be taboo. In certain patriarchal societies, for instance talking about women's sexual rights might also be considered as a taboo. Similarly, in societies which prioritize heterosexuality, the topic of homosexuality might be considered as taboo. And in each of these cases what the taboo does is that it stops the proliferation of any meaningful discourse on that particular topic.

Now, such prohibited subjects might vary from one society to another and from one time to another. But the fact remains and it remains constant that in any given society, there will be always some subjects regarding which it will be impossible to or at least very difficult to create a socially acceptable discourse a set of meaningful statements. Thus, though in theory the topics on which we can have a discourse is infinite, in practice, we can talk or write about only certain things. And certain things are best left aside; no meaningful discourse would be entertained by the society on those specific topics.

Now, apart from taboo the notion of madness and sanity also acts as another factor limiting the possibility of discourse. For instance, if I say the elephants are flying in the air; most probably I would be taken as a mad person. And what this will do to my utterances is precisely what the categorization of Mansur Al-Hallaj as an apostate did to his utterances on god it will all be made meaningless.

Thus, if discourse is to be understood as composed of meaningful statements, then it follows that someone who is deemed mad cannot generate discourse. So, even though a mad person might be able to speak, might be able to utter sounds, in a society which considers that person to be mad his speech will not be given the acceptance of a discourse.

Now, the reason I mentioned that a mad man's speech will not be accepted as discourse within a society that considers him to be mad is because just like taboo the understanding of madness too is specific to certain social milieus. So, in other words, different societies separated from one another specially or temporarily, might construe the idea of madness differently. But irrespective of what a particular society is understanding of madness is; the basic concept of madness remains present in all society. So, all society will make a distinction between what is madness and what is sane, what is guided by sanity; which means that in any given society and at any given point in time, there will always be a group of statements which will be denied the status of discourse, because of its association with madness.

So, apart from taboo and madness Foucault also talks about another factor. Foucault talks about institutional ratification; that limits the proliferation of discourse. And if we consider this, we will understand that our process of knowing about things and talking or writing meaningfully about them; are closely guided by various institutions like our schools, colleges, the publishing industry, the news agencies, learn at societies, laboratories, etcetera.

For instance, if I were to say today that the sun goes around the earth, then such a statement would not be admitted as part of a meaningful discourse because it will not be ratified by these institutes which regulate knowledge production and knowledge consumption in today's world.

Yet at one point in history, this very statement that the sun revolves around the earth enjoyed institutional validity. Thus, again like taboo and madness, institutional ratification is also place and time specific. But again like what I said about the earlier 2 categories, institutional ratification 2 would exist in some form or another in all societies. And in every society, institutional ratification will try to control the generation and the circulation of discourses that might be dangerous for the existing political power structure.

So, as you can see here with the discussion of these limiting factors, we gradually move from the restricted domain of text to the domain of the socio political context which frames the text, and we had already started this movement from Barthe and Derrida. But with Foucault we have reached a point that we cannot read a text on its own by merely

focusing on the meaning making processes that goes on within it, but we also need to connect it with the context. And when we take up the discussion of Marxist literary theory in our next lecture, this shift from text to context or rather this relationship between the text and the context would become even more apparent.

Thank you for listening.