

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 28
Literature and Psychoanalysis (V): Jacques Lacan

Hello, all of you and welcome back to this lecture on Literary Theory for the past few lectures we have been discussing; how Psychoanalysis can provide a novel way of approaching literature. And our focus so far has been on the work of Sigmund Freud and of Carl Gustav Jung. Now we have noticed certain significant differences in the works of Freud and Jung, but we have also observed significant commonality. And the commonality is that the object of psychological study be it symptoms of hysteria or dreams or parapraxis or fantasies all of them are first presented in the form of a narrative.

The psychoanalyst treats these narratives as something like a wheel and once this wheel is lifted the narrative reveals the workings of the unconscious. Now in case of Freud it is just the personal unconscious. And in case of Jung of course, there is also the added layer of collective unconscious. But in both the cases the strategy of Freud as well as Jung remains the same language leading us to desires, wishes, fears, and memories repressed or imprinted in our subconscious.

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“the unconscious is structured like a language”

Today we are going to discuss a psychoanalyst who radically revised this strategy by arguing famously that “the unconscious is structured like a language”. In other words our language users do not reveal our unconscious rather, language is our unconscious. The psychoanalyst that I am referring to here is Jacques Lacan and like always before we start exploring his works; we will briefly dwell upon some biographical details and we will do that because that will help us contextualize our discussion better.

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Jacques Lacan (1901 -1981)

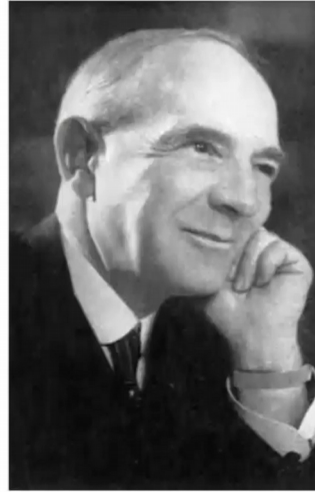


Source: Coldfront Magazine

Now Lacan his dates are 1901 to 1981 and he first achieved recognition with the publication of his doctoral thesis on paranoid psychosis and this he published in 1932. In 1936 Lacan came up with his first major idea that would eventually go on to form one of the key pillars of his version of psychoanalysis. And this was the idea of the mirror stage which Lacan presented for the first time in the 14th conference of the International Psychoanalytic Association. Now, while presenting this paper Lacan was stopped midway by the President of the Association who was sharing the panel.

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Ernest Jones
(1979 - 1958)



Source: Wikipedia

And the president of that association at that point of time was Ernest Jones, who was a close associate of Freud and who was also Freud's biographer. And Lacan was stopped from presenting his full paper and his paper also did not receive any mention in the conference publication that later came out. Now, this event has been interpreted in two different lights; one interpretation is that in the conference each speaker was allotted 10 minutes for their papers. And therefore, Ernest Jones was not trying to especially gag the content of Lacan's paper by stopping him midway, but he was just performing his role as the chairperson of the panel by telling the speaker that your time is up so you should stop now. And moreover the conference publication did not carry Lacan's paper simply because Lacan did not submit the paper for publication.

Some however, do not believe in this rather mundane interpretation and they read into this event of the 14th Congress of International Psychoanalytic Association. Lacan's first major rift with the mainstream institutions of psychoanalysis; this interpretation is given further credibility by referring to Lacan's later conflicts with the international psychoanalytic association; which as an organization refused to recognize Lacan as a practicing psychoanalyst. This was because Freud had introduced a standard practice of analyzing the patients for sessions that lasted for 50 minutes.

Lacan converted these standard 50 minute sessions into sessions of variable lengths. And what this meant was that Lacan would spend different amounts of time with his different

patients and the amount of time that he is going to spend with a particular patient was not predetermined. So, the time that Lacan would spend with a patient might vary from just a few minutes or even a few seconds on the one hand to several hours on the other.

Now, such experimentation with the length of sessions proved to be too scandalous for the psychoanalytic orthodoxy represented by the International Psychoanalytic Society or IPA. And thus in 1963 Lacan's name was struck off as a member of IPA and its affiliate societies. Now all of this might suggest that Lacan was consciously rebelling against the legacy of Freudian psychoanalysis not only by deviating from his fixed length sessions, but also by burning his bridges with the IPA which was an organization that was set up by Freud himself.

Indeed this impression of Lacan departing from Freud gets even stronger if an uninitiated reader reads a few pages of Freud's writings and then compare them to Lacan's. The lucid narrative style of Freud is in sharp contrast with Lacan's writings which often appear to be deliberately obscurantist and filled with mathematical equations and cryptic diagrams that thoroughly disrupt any semblance of narrative flow.

Yet despite of these surface differences Lacan always claimed himself to be a Freudian. In fact, his argument was that psychoanalytic orthodoxy of his time was not Freudian enough which is why he asked his audience to look at his works as an effort to return to Freud and to his true teachings. This attachment of Lacan to Freud can in fact, be well observed from the fact that when IPA and its affiliates struck off Lacan's name from their membership list he went on to establish his own psychoanalytic organization which he named *Ecole Freudienne de Paris*; which literally translates as the Freudian School of Paris.

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École Freudienne de Paris (1964)

This institution founded in 1964 gained prominence during the next few decades and it established what may be called a Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis. Interestingly however, in 1980 just a year before Lacan died, he dissolved this school that he had founded and he famously told his followers and I quote here.

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“It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian.”

“It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian”, but in spite of these repeated assertions of being a Freudian one cannot help, but consider Lacan as a wonderfully original thinker; who even while revisiting such typically Freudian concepts

like the oedipal complex for instance drastically changes our more mundane understanding of that phenomenon. Indeed it was this charismatic originality that made Lacan into a cult figure in the post Second World War decades within the intellectual circles of Paris. And at the heart of this cult status was the seminar series which Lacan started delivering in 1953 and with which he continued till 1980.

So, Lacan delivered a number of seminars during his entire lifetime and this lecture series this seminar series was attended by various French intellectuals of the day including figures like Michel Foucault; we are already familiar with Foucault, but also others like usually Lucy for instance Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva. And one interesting piece of information about this seminar series was that between 1964 and 1969 these seminars were delivered in Paris Ecole normale superieure or ENS.

Now those of you who have carefully followed my previous lectures would know that ENS was the intellectual hotbed during the 1960 a number of scholars associated with the events of 1968 were indeed affiliated to ENS at some point in their life. And indeed when Lacan was delivering his lectures in ENS in which he was reinterpreting Freud at the same time and at the same venue Louis Althusser was working on his reinterpretation of Marx's capital and producing seminal text like reading capital or for Marx. And both these contemporaries in their powerful reinterpretation of Marx and Freud were being heavily influenced by the weave of structuralism which at that point of time was sweeping through France because of the influence that Claude Levi Strauss publications had at that point in time.

So, an important thing to note here is that though standard textbooks of literary theory would usually present figures like a Levi Strauss Alcazar and Lacan under three different chapters dealing with say structuralism Marxism and psychoanalysis. Yet we discover very intimate linkages between the works of these intellectuals. And therefore, one innovative way of approaching literary theory might be to group literary theorists according to their locational proximity in terms of space and time rather than according to their acclaimed ideological affiliation so, this is a thought and you might want to turn this in your head a little.

But right now we are going to move from this biographical sketch of Lacan to study some of his main ideas. Now one interesting thing about Lacan is that his thoughts were

chiefly conveyed to his audience through lectures through seminars rather than through book publications. Indeed apart from his doctoral thesis Lacan only published one book in his lifetime which was titled *Écrits* which literally means writings. And, this was collection of all of the major essays that Lacan had written till 1966.

It also contained the essay on the mirror stage, but not the one that he presented in the IPA conference in the 1930, it was a later version it was a version that Lacan had worked on and had presented in late 1940. The notes of his seminars as I mentioned he kept on delivering seminars from the 1950 till 1980 they now represent the chief part of Lacan's (Refer Time: 14:04) and they are right now in the process of being published. So, some of it is already out there, but some of it is still to come out in the form of books. So, like some of the other theorists that we have encountered in this course the Lacanian canon too is very much in the making. However, the basic framework of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is pretty well established.

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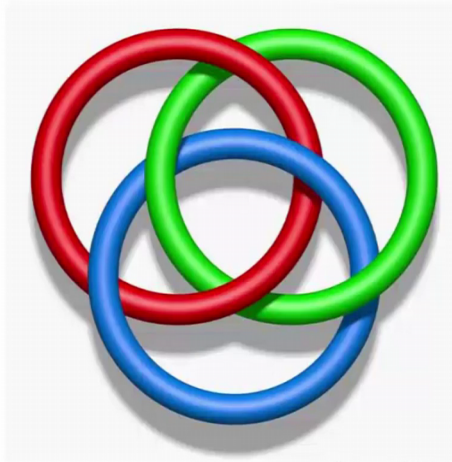
According to Lacan, our psychological life is guided by three different orders or registers:

- Imaginary
- Symbolic
- Real

According to Lacan our psychological life is guided by three different orders or registers which he referred to as one the imaginary, two the symbolic, and three the real. These three orders form a kind of interlocking matrix which Lacan depicted through the image of the Borromean rings which you can see on the slide.

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Borromean rings



Source: Wikipedia

Now, this complex structure that you can see is referred to as Borromean rings because this structure famously formed part of the coat of arms of the Italian aristocratic family of the Borromean. Now what is noticeable about this structure is how the rings are intertwined and they are intertwined in such a way that if any one of these three rings break then the entire structure falls apart. From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis the imaginary the symbolic and the real are intertwined like the three Borromean rings and our psychological phenomena play out in the spaces created between these intersecting orders.

But what constitutes the imaginary or the symbolic or the real; let me take them up one by one starting with the imaginary order. Now the first thing that we need to clarify before going into any detailed exploration of the imaginary is that the name of this order is not rooted in the usual English meaning of the term imaginary which usually means unreal or fictitious.

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The term Imaginary derives from the word "image"

The term imaginary rather derives from the word "image"; and this order has at its centre the process of the development of the ego with reference to the image of one's body as a coherent whole. As far as Lacan is concerned the most crucial aspect of this process of ego development that is to say the development of the sense of one's own identity is what is referred to as the mirror stage. Now this mirror stage is something that happens in the life of a child when it is between 6 and 18 months and it happens when the child starts recognizing the image of its own body on a mirror as its own self.

To understand the major implications of this recognition of one's own bodily image as one's own self we will have to start from the phase that precedes the mirror stage. Now in this preceding stage the child does not have any coherent sense of its own body nor any sharp sense of distinction between its own self and the external world. This is why Lacan wittily refers to a child located in this phase as an "omelette".

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“Hommelette” is a portmanteau configuration which yokes together two different French words and their meanings - “homme” and “omelette”.

Now, this word is what is called a portmanteau configuration which yokes together two different words, two different French words and the meanings of these two different French words. So, the first word that we have to note here is a word homme right note the spelling it has an h which is silent; now in French the word homme means man. The second word is omelette which is also commonly used in English and as we know it refers to a preparation of beaten eggs that is spread out on a frying pan and then allowed to gradually solidify over heat. Now a very young child is not yet a man or an homme, but an omelette in the same way that a small book is a booklet or a small pig is a piglet. At another level this very young child in the phase that precedes the mirror stage does not have a very well defined notion of its bodily identity and is thus something akin to an omelette of beaten eggs, where the liquid mixture keeps spreading over the frying pan without any definite shape.

Thus the portmanteau word omelette with an h is used by Lacan as a pun operating on both these levels. Now when between the age of 6 and 18 months the child learns to recognize its bodily image in the mirror or in any other shiny surface. Then two very important things happen, the first thing is that the baby gets to recognize its body as a comprehensive entity and a well defined shape that is distinct from shapes of other things or other persons around it. The second thing that happens is that the baby gains a semblance of mastery over the image of its own self. Now this is because the baby

realizes that it can manipulate the image on the mirror by shifting its own arms, its legs, its head etcetera.

Now, both of these ideas of a distinctly shaped body and a sense of mastery over it that the baby acquires vis a vis its mirror image is actually in contrast to the lack of motor skills and sense of bodily fragmentation that the baby otherwise experiences. Therefore, the mirror image becomes a sight of pleasure, a sight which gives it a sense of completeness and of being in control a sense which it otherwise lacks this leads the baby to identify with the image on the mirror. So, in other words as far as the baby is concerned is the image on the mirror that comes to stand for who he or she is; from the Lacanian perspective the ego or what is also referred to him by the word ideal I is therefore, identified as this self image acquired during the mirror stage.

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According to Lacan, ego has two characteristic features - one is **misrecognition** and the other is **alienation**.

Consequently according to Lacan the ego has two characteristic features; one is misrecognition and the other is, alienation. So, why is you associated with misrecognition by Lacan. Well the mirrored image which becomes the basis of ego or the ideal I is at the final instance only an illusion. It gets prioritized in the psychological world of the baby because it gives the baby a sense of wholeness and mastery. But then again this wholeness and mastery is actually an illusion because it is missing from the actual experiential world of the baby. The identification of the baby with the image this

happens at the cost of putting aside the actual experiential sense of being which is why Lacan classifies it as a deliberate misrecognition.

The reason why ego is associated with alienation is something which must have already become clear from our discussion; because the ego is based on an image which is an external projection that is located outside the subject. Now this is what Lacan means when he says that the ego which is sort of the image of the self is alien to ones own self. And here we need to take into account two very important things; the first is that Lacan here is making a distinction between what he calls the subject and the ego. Why, because the ego is an alien idea or an external image that the subject latches on to and invests with a sense of identity it is outside the subject.

And second is that the use of the term alienation that is present here that we encountered in Lacan is very different from the earlier use of the term that we have encountered in this lecture series. We have encountered the term alienation if you remember when we were dealing with Marxism especially when we were talking about (Refer Time: 24:41) epic theater. So, I want you to study them separately and not to confuse them they are very different though the term is the same the term of alienation. So, this is what I had to say about the imaginary order; now let us move on to the symbolic order. Lacan's work on this symbolic order was very heavily influenced by the structuralist insights of Claude Levi Strauss. Since this is the case we will therefore, start our discussion on the symbolic order by revisiting some of the ideas of Levi Strauss.

Now, if you remember our earlier lecture on Claude Levi Strauss you will know that there we had discussed his structuralist approach to mix in details. But we had also mentioned in that lecture that Levi Strauss uses the structuralist lens to also approach kinship relationships and in that lecture I had not elaborated on the kinship structure, but that is where we need to focus today in order to understand the roots of Lacan's symbolic order.

For Claude Levi Strauss in his study of the human kinship noted that kinship relations are underlined by a sort of grammatical structure; which was above and beyond the actual human beings who performed the kinship rules. To understand this let us take an example, let us say that there is a real historical woman called let us say Parvati and let us say that this lady gets married to a real man a real historical man whose name is

Anand. Now, this marriage of two real and unique individuals will immediately situate them in a network of kinship relations of various kinds of in laws for instance; which is independent of the individuals per say. That is to say if Parvati were to marry someone called Mukul instead of someone called Anand that marriage in its turn will open up the same kind of kinship network as the other.

So, here the identity of Parvati operates at two distinct levels. One at the level of signifier and the other at the level of signified. The signifier here is a role of the wife and the signified here is an actual person who is Parvati. Now from our study of structuralism we know that the meaning of the signifier is independent of the signified. Indeed the signifier gains its meaning through its relations with other signifiers.

Similarly, the role of the wife gains meaning only inside the context of the network of other kinship relations within which it is situated. In the language of structuralism the grammar of kinship relations which determine the meaning and significance of particular kinship rules within any society resembles the level of quote unquote lang. The marriage of Parvati and Anand or Parvati and Mukul for that matter operates as individual instances of parole which mobilizes the lang of kinship grammar.

Now, though I have been somewhat cryptic here I am sure those of you who have followed my lectures on structuralism and post structuralism carefully you would have no difficulty in understanding my explanation here. So, the main inference that we can draw from this study of Levi Strauss on kinship structure is that at one level; human beings operate in society just as signifiers operate within language. This is what is referred to as the symbolic order where there are no essential identities, but simply marks or symbols which generate meaning through their inter relations.

Now, what is important to note here is that this symbolic order of kinship structure within which humans operate precedes their individual existence. Thus for instance the identity of wife within the kinship structure precedes the existence of the real life figure Parvati. And the event of her getting married becomes significant only because of this preceding lang of kinship grammar. This is similar to how the underlying structure of lang for instance pre exists individual instances of parole.

Now, Lacan both adopted this concept from Levi Strauss as well as expanded upon it. According to Lacan it was not only the kinship relations that represented the symbolic

order, but all other aspects of human social and psychological life as well. This was because human existence is inextricably associated with the symbolic order of language which precedes our individual existence and in fact, which is going to continue beyond the end of our individual existence.

So, in other words we become fully human only when we are subjected to the symbolic order of language. Thus, language is a medium or template on which we articulate our identity. And this quote unquote I which we utter from within the language to identify ourselves operate just like the mirror image. It is external to us this articulation of I, but it is the mark on which we project our sense of selfhood. Thus, both the mirror image and the language from within which we enunciate the I that identifies us are alien or other to us.

Now to distinguish between these two others Lacan refers to language as the big other with a capital O. And, the reason he does that is because with the mirror image there is a very tight fit between the image and the subject's identity. So, my mirror image for instance begins and ends with me. And this is why Lacan calls it the small other. Language on the other hand is an other quote unquote other which precedes me and which will continue after me. Therefore, language cannot be completely assimilated within my individual identity and this is why it is referred to by Lacan as the big other right. So, this is the distinction between the big other and the small other, the small other is a mirror image and the big other is the language.

Now, when Lacan asserts that our human identity is articulated from within the symbolic order of language; he is not just speaking of the conscious part of our identity, but also the unconscious part. This is because Lacan believes that all our wishes, our desires, our fears, even when they are repressed are actually structured by the force field of language. In other words our desires, wishes, fears are all generated from within the symbolic order of language irrespective of whether they get replaced or not; which is why Lacan argues that not only our conscious self identity, but also our unconscious is structured like a language.

Now, this idea which as I told you in my introduction to this lecture is a very important idea that is associated with Lacan and from the perspective of literary studies this idea changes a lot of things. But before that you might ask this question as to how this idea of

desires and fears how do they generate within the symbolic order what is the meaning of that. Well in order to understand that we will have to go into a discussion of how Lacan reinterprets Freud's idea of oedipal complex. But unfortunately we do not have that amount of time in our hands so this will remain a gap in our lecture.

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Sean Homer, Jacques Lacan (Routledge; 2005)

But if you are interested to know more about it, I can refer you Sean Homers book on Jacques Lacan in the Routledge critical thinker series and that book really provides a very lucid elaboration of this Lacanian reinterpretation of oedipal complex. And if you are interested to know more about how desires and wishes can get generated within the symbolic order then I suggest you go and read that.

Now, as I said that it is important to note here that this idea of the unconscious being structured like a language radically revises the relationship between literature or any other concrete language used for that matter with the unconscious. With Freud or even with Jung instances of language uses were probed to reach at the unconscious that lived beyond the linguistic structure. But, with Lacan we reach at an understanding of the unconscious which is linguistic in nature, which is itself like language. This is a typically structuralist move where everything gets folded within the language structure and there is no transcendental signified outside the structure. With Freud and Jung the unconscious stood beyond the structure of language imparting layers of meaning to it while itself

remaining above and beyond that meaning making process. With Lacan however, the unconscious itself gets folded within the structuring process of language.

And so just to give you an example the two processes of condensation and displacement that we have already discussed. And which I have pointed out plays a very important role in the Freudian concept of dream work; is interpreted by Lacan in terms of language use; for instance he relates the idea of condensation with the linguistic trope of metaphor. And he relates the idea of displacement with the linguistic trope of metonymy. So, it is interesting to dwell into this Lacanian interpretation of the unconscious as language operating as language. I can only be this brief in this lecture I cannot elaborate it beyond this point, but it is something that you might want to probe for yourself.

So, the tissue of language which constitutes literature becomes here with Lacan the same tissue that constitutes the unconscious of the author as well as the reader. So, here again we come back to the core idea of structuralist literary criticism; that there is nothing beyond language and its structuring principles in the form of a transcendental signified. So, with this we would end our discussion of Lacan but before I end let me briefly dwell upon the order of the real and here when I say briefly I really mean it because, this is a concept that Lacan himself kept rather vague. Now the reason why Lacan kept himself vague when talking about the real is because, the real is that which continuously escapes the articulation of the symbolic order or language.

So, let me on this statement though Lacan assert that the whole of our psychological life is structured by the symbolic order of language. He also admits the presence of a reality that is beyond the symbolic order. This is the reality which constantly which consistently escapes articulation through language and this is what constitutes for Lacan the order of real with a capital R.

An example of our encounter with the real would be for instance our encountering near fatal accident or a life threatening situation. Now in that encounter we are left speechless, it causes a trauma that is beyond the articulation and that stuns us into absolute silence. Sooner or later we overcome this stunned state and we get back to the symbolic order of language and articulation, but the moment of shock when we are left stunned and speechless that is the moment which Lacan would point out as our encounter with the real; with something that is beyond articulation. So, with this we complete our discussion

on Lacan and we also complete our discussion on the topic of psychoanalysis and literature. In the next lecture we will take up feminism and how that relates to the field of literary studies.

Thank you.