

## Psychoanalytic criticism

### Introduction

Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders 'by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind' (as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* puts it). The classic method of doing this is to get the patient to talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining 'buried' in the unconscious. This practice is based upon specific theories of how the mind, the instincts, and sexuality work. These theories were developed by the Austrian, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). There is a growing consensus today that the therapeutic value of the method is limited, and that Freud's life-work is seriously flawed by methodological irregularities. All the same, Freud remains a major cultural force, and his impact on how we think about ourselves has been incalculable.

Freud's major ideas include those italicised in the next three paragraphs. All of Freud's work depends upon the notion of the *unconscious*, which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions. Freud was not the discoverer of the unconscious: his uniqueness lies in his attributing to it such a decisive role in our lives. Linked with this is the idea of *repression*, which is the 'forgetting' or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events.

so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious. A similar process is that of *sublimation*, whereby the repressed material is 'promoted' into something grander or is disguised as something 'noble'. For instance, sexual urges may be given sublimated expression in the form of intense religious experiences or longings. Later in his career Freud suggested a three-part, rather than a two-part, model of the psyche, dividing it into the *ego*, the *super-ego*, and the *id*, these three 'levels' of the personality roughly corresponding to, respectively, the consciousness, the conscience, and the unconscious.

Many of Freud's ideas concern aspects of sexuality. *Infantile sexuality*, for instance, is the notion that sexuality begins not at puberty, with physical maturing, but in infancy, especially through the infant's relationship with the mother. Connected with this is the *Oedipus complex*, whereby, says Freud, the male infant conceives the desire to eliminate the father and become the sexual partner of the mother. Many forms of inter-generational conflict are seen by Freudians as having Oedipal overtones, such as professional rivalries, often viewed in Freudian terms as reproducing the competition between siblings for parental favour. (As the very idea of the Oedipal complex would suggest, Freudian theory is often deeply masculinist in bias.) Another key idea is that of the *libido*, which is the energy drive associated with sexual desire. In classic Freudian theory it has three stages of focus, the *oral*, the *anal*, and the *phallic*. The libido in the individual is part of a more generalised drive which the later Freud called *Eros* (the Greek word for 'love'), which roughly means the life instinct, the opposite of which is *Thanatos* (the Greek word for 'death'), which roughly means the death instinct, a controversial notion, of course.

Several key terms concern what might be called psychic processes, such as *transference*, the phenomenon whereby the patient under analysis redirects the emotions recalled in analysis towards the psychoanalyst: thus, the antagonism or resentment felt towards a parental figure in the past might be reactivated, but directed against the analyst. Another such mechanism is *projection*, when aspects of ourselves (usually negative ones) are not recognised as part of ourselves but are perceived in or attributed to another; our own desires or antagonisms, for instance, may be 'disowned' in this

way. Both these might be seen as *defence mechanisms*, that is, as psychic procedures for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions. Another such is the *screen memory*, which is a trivial or inconsequential memory whose function is to obliterate a more significant one. A well-known example of these mechanisms is the *Freudian slip*, which Freud himself called the 'parapraxis', whereby repressed material in the unconscious finds an outlet through such everyday phenomena as slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, or unintended actions.

A final example of important Freudian terminology is the *dream work*, the process by which real events or desires are transformed into dream images. These include: *displacement*, whereby one person or event is represented by another which is in some way linked or associated with it, perhaps because of a similar-sounding word, or by some form of symbolic substitution; and *condensation*, whereby a number of people, events, or meanings are combined and represented by a single image in the dream. Thus, characters, motivation, and events are represented in dreams in a very 'literary' way, involving the translation, by the dream work, of abstract ideas or feelings into concrete images. Dreams, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person.

### How Freudian interpretation works

Freudian interpretation is popularly thought to be a matter of attributing sexual connotations to objects, so that towers and ladders, for instance, are seen as phallic symbols. This kind of thing had become a joke even in Freud's own lifetime, and we should remember that he once said, 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar'. (Freud was a heavy cigar smoker, mind you, so he had a vested interest in saying that.) In reality, Freudian interpretation is often highly ingenious, rather than highly simplistic. For example, let's imagine how a dream featuring a Roman soldier might be interpreted. Freud believes that a dream is an escape-hatch or safety-valve through which repressed desires, fears, or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind. The emotion in question is censored by the conscious mind and so has to enter the dream in disguise, like a person barred from a club

who gets in by dressing up as somebody else. The Roman soldier might be connected with the real subject of the dream by a chain of associations. Let's say that the dreamer is a young adult still under the thumb of an authoritarian father but wanting to break away from his influence and experience adult life to the full. The Roman soldier might represent the father by a process of *association*: the father is associated with ideas of strictness, authority, and power in the domestic sphere; the Roman soldier is linked to the same things in the political sphere; so the one is substituted for the other. So the soldier in the dream is a symbolic representation of the father.

But several meanings might be condensed into this symbol. Suppose the dreamer is tempted to rebel against the father by entering into a sexual liaison of which the father would certainly disapprove. The Roman soldier might also represent this person, the envisaged lover; perhaps the clichéd phrase 'Latin lover' might have prompted this. Thus, both the feared father and the desired lover are *condensed* into the single dream figure of the Roman soldier.

The purpose of devices like displacement and condensation is two-fold. Firstly, as we said, they disguise the repressed fears and wishes contained in the dream so that they can get past the censor which normally prevents their surfacing into the conscious mind. Secondly, they fashion this material into something which can be represented in a dream, that is, into images, symbols, and metaphors. Material has to be turned into this form for dreams, since dreams don't *say* things, they *show* things. In this sense especially, as we have indicated, they are very like literature. Hence the interest of literary critics in Freudian methods of interpretation.

This should raise questions in your mind about how we decide when a Freudian interpretation is plausible and when not. I want to take one more example, this time from a book by Freud called *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. In spite of its title, this is one of Freud's most enjoyable and accessible publications. Its subtitle explains what it's about: 'Forgetting, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, superstitions and errors'. (Bungled actions are when you do things like unwrapping a sweet, putting the paper in your mouth, and throwing away the sweet.) The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the

conscious mind. But this doesn't make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually. As Freud famously said, 'There is always a return of the repressed'. Slips of the tongue or pen, the forgetting of names, and similar 'accidents' show this repressed material in the act of seeking a way back.

The example is from Freud's own experience and it attributes significance to the forgetting of a word from a quotation. It is worth spending a little time on, since it typifies the quality of complexity and ingenuity which I have suggested is common in Freudian interpretation. Freud explains that while on holiday with his family he met an academic young man who, like Freud, was Jewish and they discussed the anti-semitism which might hinder their careers. The young man voiced strong feelings on this matter, expressing the wish that such wrongs might be put right by a future generation. He made this point with a quotation from the Latin poet Virgil, using words spoken by Dido, Queen of Carthage, when she is abandoned by Aeneas. Her words are '*Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*', meaning 'May someone arise from our bones as an avenger', but in quoting the line in Latin the young man accidentally leaves out the word 'aliquis' (which means 'someone'). Freud corrects the quotation, and the young man (who has read Freud's books) challenges him to explain the significance of this simple act of forgetting. Freud accepts the challenge, and asks the young man to say 'candidly and uncritically whatever comes into your mind if you direct your attention to the forgotten word without any definite aim'. This produces the following sequence of associations:

*Firstly*, similar-sounding words like *relics*, *liquefying*, *fluidity*, and *fluid*.

*Secondly*, St Simon of Trent, whose relics he saw some years ago.

*Thirdly*, an article in an Italian newspaper called 'What St Augustine says about women'.

*Fourthly*, St Januarius, whose blood is kept in a phial in a church at Naples and on a particular holy day it miraculously liquefies. He says 'the people get very agitated if it is delayed'. Freud points out that two of these saints (*Januarius* and *Augustine*) have names which link them closely with the calendar, and he has already worked out

why the young man forgot the word 'aliquis'. The young man has been uneasy about a certain event, and if he had said the word 'aliquis' that would have reminded him again of this anxiety: so the unconscious protects him by deleting the word from his conscious memory. Perhaps you can already work out what the event is which the young man is worried about. He breaks off and says in some embarrassment 'I've suddenly thought of a young lady from whom I might easily hear a piece of news that would be very awkward for both of us'. He hesitates, and Freud asks 'That her periods have stopped?' The young man is astonished, and Freud explains how he knew: 'Think of the calendar saints, the blood that starts to flow on a particular day, the disturbance when the event fails to take place.'

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### STOP and THINK

In its elaborateness, and its use of what literary critics would call 'symbolism', this example is fairly typical of aspects of psychoanalytic interpretation. How convincing do you find it?

Try to pin-point your own reaction in a specific way. What is your judgement based upon? Do you distrust the example because of its elaborateness? (I am assuming some degree of distrust, since that is what I have encountered whenever I have used it.) Should there be a limit to the number of associative steps allowable between the slip and its interpretation? Without some such limit, could not the chain of associations be made to stretch to almost any interpretative destination? Or is it the nature of the steps, rather than their number, which makes the example finally unconvincing? If so, what is it about them which has this effect?

Note that the example seems to require the unconscious to anticipate the flow of conscious thought, to see that any word suggesting liquid will act as a reminder of the feared pregnancy, and then to eliminate the Latin word 'aliquis', preemptively, from the conscious mind.

My own feeling about it is that there is an attractive complexity about this example, far removed from the banalities of interpretations which are popularly called 'Freudian'. The anxiety

felt by the young man is shown to suffuse the mind, in what seems to me a very plausible way, rather than being locked away in some specific compartment; hence, it is likely to surface anywhere at all. But perhaps this is simply to say that the elaborateness is what I like about this example.

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Freudian interpretation, then, has always been of considerable interest to literary critics. The basic reason, again, is that the unconscious, like the poem, or novel, or play, cannot speak directly and explicitly but does so through images, symbols, emblems, and metaphors. Literature, too, is not involved with making direct explicit statements about life, but with showing and expressing experience through imagery, symbolism, metaphor and so on. However, because the 'statements' made are not explicit there is an inevitable 'judgemental' element involved, and in consequence psychoanalytic interpretations of literature are often controversial.

#### Freud and evidence

Distrust of Freud has been growing in recent years, partly as a result of his mainly negative views on women, as seen in the notion that women's sexuality is based upon feelings of narcissism, masochism, and passivity, and the idea that they suffer from an innate form of inferiority complex known as 'penis envy'. Recent work seems to show that these views were maintained by misreading, or even misrepresenting, the evidence presented to him by his patients; for instance by taking accounts of sexual abuse in childhood as fantasies rather than reality. Freud's wilful misreading is seen in the case study usually known simply as 'Dora', but officially entitled 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (volume 8 in the Pelican Freud Library). Feminist critics, and others, have read this case study as a means of psychoanalysing Freud. For instance, a collection of essays on the case appeared in 1985 under the title *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, and Feminism* (ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, Virago, 1985). 'Dora' was brought to Freud for treatment in the autumn of the year 1900, by her father, as an eighteen-year-old. Her parents had found a note threatening suicide, which was the

culmination of a period of withdrawal and difficulty. Dora broke off the treatment before it reached any conclusion, so Freud calls the case 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria'. The bulk of the material is Freud's analysis and interpretation of two dreams which she related to him in the course of the treatment, and we'll concentrate on one of these.

The family situation at the time the analysis took place is that Dora's wealthy parents were unhappy in their marriage, but they had formed a close friendship with another couple, Mr and Mrs K. A sexual relationship developed between Dora's father and Mrs K, which went on for several years. Mr K knew of this, and all three adults seemed to have an unspoken agreement that in exchange, as it were, Dora should be made available to Mr K. Mr K made approaches to her on two occasions, the first in his office, when she was fourteen; in a state of obvious excitement he suddenly took hold of her and began to kiss her. She reacted with a violent feeling of disgust and ran out. Freud considered this reaction neurotic: in his view 'this was surely just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen', since Mr K, as he explains in a footnote, was 'still quite young and of prepossessing appearance' (p. 60).

The second occasion happened when Dora was sixteen. She and Mr K were walking together beside a lake, and he 'had the audacity to make a suggestion to her'. She slapped his face and hurried away. Freud is puzzled by the 'brutal form' of her refusal, and again sees her reaction as neurotic. When Dora told her father about what had happened he asked Mr K for an explanation, but Mr K denied that the incident had ever taken place. Her father believed him rather than Dora. Given these circumstances, Freud's view of the situation seems remarkably perverse. The first of the two dreams on which much of the analysis centres was a recurrent one, which first happened when they were staying in a house by the lake where Mr K made his indecent proposal:

A house was on fire. My father was standing beside my bed and woke me up. I dressed quickly. Mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case, but father said 'I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel-case'. We hurried downstairs, and as soon as I was outside I woke up.

(The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 8, p. 99)

Freud comments, *firstly*, that the immediate trigger of the dream is that when they arrived at this small wooden house her father said he was afraid of what would happen if there was a fire there. *Secondly*, in the afternoon Dora had woken up from an afternoon nap on the sofa to find Mr K standing over her. In the dream the father and Mr K are transposed. *Thirdly*, some years before she had heard her mother and father having a serious argument about jewels. *Fourthly*, Freud points out that the German word 'jewel-case' is a slang term for the female genitals. According to Freud, therefore, the dream expresses Dora's repressed wish to give Mr K what he wants (that is, her jewel-case): the fire represents her own repressed passion. The figure of Mr K is transposed with that of the father to express the wish that her former Oedipal love for her father will protect her from the temptation to yield to Mr K's advances. Freud sees in Dora's resentment of the relationship between her father and Mrs K a residual trace of this Oedipus complex, a feeling that Mrs K is her successful rival for her father's love. Against the combined male forces of her father, Mr K, and Freud it would seem that Dora has little chance, and the whole case study certainly shows Freud and psychoanalysis at their weakest. (Psychoanalysis in relation to feminism is further discussed in Chapter 6 on feminism.)

#### What Freudian psychoanalytic critics do

1. They give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. They associate the literary work's 'overt' content with the former, and the 'covert' content with the latter, privileging the latter as being what the work is 'really' about, and aiming to disentangle the two.
2. Hence, they pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings, whether these be (a) those of the author, or (b) those of the characters depicted in the work.
3. They demonstrate the presence in the literary work of classic psychoanalytic symptoms, conditions, or phases, such as the oral, anal, and phallic stages of emotional and sexual development in infants.

4. They make large-scale applications of psychoanalytic concepts to literary history in general; for example, Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sees the struggle for identity by each generation of poets, under the 'threat' of the greatness of its predecessors, as an enactment of the Oedipus complex.
5. They identify a 'psychic' context for the literary work, at the expense of social or historical context, privileging the individual 'psycho-drama' above the 'social drama' of class conflict. The conflict between generations or siblings, or between competing desires within the same individual looms much larger than conflict between social classes, for instance.

#### Freudian psychoanalytic criticism: examples

What kind of literary problem can Freudian psychoanalytic theories help with? Let's start with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an example which is so well-known that it has become a cliché. The relevant items in the above list of what Freudian critics do are: 1. stressing the distinction between conscious and unconscious, 2. uncovering the unconscious motives of characters, and 3. seeing in the literary work an embodiment of classic psychoanalytic conditions. In the play Hamlet's father is murdered by his own brother, Hamlet's uncle, who then marries Hamlet's mother. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Hamlet and tells him to avenge the murder by killing his uncle. There is no obvious difficulty about doing this, but Hamlet spends most of the play delaying and making excuses. Why? He is not particularly squeamish, as he kills other people in the course of the play. Also, what the ghost reveals merely confirms suspicions Hamlet had independently formed himself, and he gathers other external evidence that the ghost is telling him the truth. So why the delay? Critics have long debated the question without coming to any generally accepted conclusions. Psychoanalytic criticism offers a neat and simple solution: Hamlet cannot avenge this crime because he is guilty of wanting to commit the same crime himself. He has an Oedipus complex, that is, a repressed sexual desire for his own mother, and a consequent wish to do away with his father. Thus, the uncle has merely done what Hamlet himself secretly *wished* to

do: hence the difficulty for him of being the avenger. This view of the play was first sketched out by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). As Freud summarises the matter, Hamlet is unable to

take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner he is to punish.

(Penguin Freud Library, vol. 4, p. 367)

As evidence for this view of the play, the psychoanalytic critic points to the bedroom scene in which Hamlet shows an intense and unusual awareness of his mother's sexuality. Freud links the situation of Hamlet in the play to that of Shakespeare himself ('It can, of course, only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in *Hamlet*'). He cites the view that it was written immediately after the death of Shakespeare's own father in 1601 ('while his childhood feelings about his father had been freshly revived') and he adds, 'It is known, too, that Shakespeare's own son who died at an early age bore the name of "Hamnet", which is identical with "Hamlet"' (p. 368). All the same, it is Hamlet the character in whom the Oedipal conflict is detected, not Shakespeare the author. Here, then, is a famous problem in literature, to which psychoanalysis can offer the basis of a solution. The sketch for an interpretation of the play put forward by Freud was later developed by his British colleague Ernest Jones in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). There is a famous sustained literary pastiche of this psychoanalytical-autobiographical view of *Hamlet* in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

Another example of a puzzling play with which the psychoanalytic critic can offer help is Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. This example illustrates the third item in the list of what psychoanalytic critics do, the classic Freudian condition embodied in the play being that of the mother fixation. *The Homecoming* centres on an East End of London all-male household consisting of an autocratic father and two grown-up sons. The mother has been dead for some years but her memory is worshipped by the widower and her sons. There is a third son who has emigrated to America where he is a college professor.

He comes back on a visit to his family, bringing his wife (this being the literal homecoming of the title). During the visit the sons and the father have the idea of setting their brother's wife up as a prostitute in a Soho flat, and living off the proceeds. Their brother agrees to this, and the wife accepts it calmly when it is put to her, having first extracted the best possible financial terms, and made it clear that she will be in many ways the boss of this new household. Her husband goes back to America without her, and to their three children (all boys). These events seem so bizarre that the play is often performed as a kind of surreal farce.

But, again, the psychoanalytic critic is able to offer an explanation which makes some sense of them. In her article 'Pinter's Freudian Homecoming' (*Essays in Criticism*, July 1991, pp. 189–207) M. W. Rowe suggests that the underlying explanation is to be found in Freud's essay, 'The most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life'. The all-male family shown in the play suffers from a classic condition known as a mother fixation, in which there is an exaggerated reverence for the mother. Such people are attracted only to women who resemble the mother, but because of this the shadow of the incest taboo makes the expression of sexual feelings towards them difficult or impossible. Hence, their only way out is to seek sexual relationships with women who do not resemble the mother, and whom they therefore despise. So in order to generate sexual excitement such men have to degrade their love objects, since if they are not so degraded they will resemble the mother, and hence, in the man's mind, not be available as a sexual partner. Thus, women are polarised into idealised maternal figures on the one hand and prostitute figures on the other. The exaggerated reverence for the mother is usually much diluted by adolescence, but if the mother has died before the child reached adolescence, as in the household shown in the play, then a damaging, idealised image of her can live on, and eclipse that of all possible sexual partners. Hence, when the brothers propose the prostitute plan the husband accepts this because that is how he himself has thought about or fantasised about his wife in order to make a sexual relationship with her possible. Again, then, the action which we see presented in the play turns out to be an enacting of the suppressed desires of one of the central characters.

## Lacan

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) was a French psychoanalyst whose work has had an extraordinary influence upon many aspects of recent literary theory. Lacan began his career by taking a medical degree and then training in psychiatry in the 1920s. In the 1930s he worked on paranoia, publishing his thesis on his patient Aimée. His famous theory of the ‘mirror stage’ (explained later) was first presented at a conference in 1936. Subsequently his ideas were influenced by figures who successively dominated Parisian intellectual life, such as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–), and the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). Only in the 1950s did Lacan begin to challenge the orthodoxies of his subject field. In 1955 at a conference in Vienna he called for a new ‘back-to-basics’ Freudianism. But he meant, not a new attempt to understand the ‘conscious personality’ (the ‘ego’) and interpret its behaviour in the light of an understanding of the workings of the unconscious (which many would take to be the whole point of Freudianism), but rather a new emphasis on the the unconscious itself, as ‘the nucleus of our being’. In 1959 these unorthodox views resulted in his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association (a kind of World Congress of Freudian analysts) and in 1964 in Paris he set up his own breakaway Ecole Freudienne and published a section of his training sessions under the title *Ecrits*. By this time he himself was one of the most prominent Parisian intellectuals.

Lacan’s reputation, then, rests on the published ‘seminars’, the *Ecrits*. A French seminar is not a group discussion but a kind of extended lecture for graduate-level students. The intense atmosphere of these occasions is suggested in an eyewitness account of Lacan’s seminars in the 1950s:

He speaks in a wavering, syncopated or thundering voice, spiced with sighs and hesitations. He notes down in advance what he is going to say, then, before the public, he improvises like an actor from the Royal Shakespeare Company ... he fascinates his audience with his impressive language ... Lacan does not analyse, he associates. Lacan does not lecture, he produces resonances. At each session of this collective treatment, the pupils have the impression that the master

speaks about them and for them in a coded message secretly destined for each one.

(Quoted by John Lechte in *Julia Kristeva*, Routledge, 1990, pp. 36–7)

Note here the emphasis on showmanship, on improvisation, on by-passing the formally structured presentation of ideas usual in lectures, and on the transmission of information in a coded form as part of an initiation process. Lacan says, in the piece discussed below, that the only teaching worthy of the name is teaching you can only come to terms with in its own terms. I emphasise all this to prepare you for the initial strangeness of Lacan’s writing, all of which was based on the semi-improvised meditations which occupied the two to three hours of these weekly occasions.

The vast output of Lacan has not all been of equal interest to literary critics. The major interest has been in the following:

1. The essay ‘The insistence of the letter in the unconscious’, reprinted in David Lodge, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory* (Longman, 1988), pp. 79–106.
2. The seminar on Edgar Allan Poe’s story ‘The Purloined Letter’, reprinted in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 28–54, with extensive editorial commentary and annotations.
3. The seminar on *Hamlet*, ‘Desire and the Interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*’, reprinted in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: the Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Shoshana Felman, ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 11–52.

Lacan’s own explication of his ideas is often intimidatingly obscure. I would suggest that in reading him you should devote some study time to reading the same piece several times, rather than reading through a great deal of his work once only. In grappling with Lacan I have found the following particularly helpful:

1. David Lodge’s pre-summary of the argument of Lacan’s ‘The insistence of the letter in the unconscious’, pp. 79–80 in *Modern Criticism and Theory*.

2. John Lechte's account of Lacan's thinking, chapter two 'The effect of the unconscious' in his book *Julia Kristeva*, pp. 13–64. I have also drawn upon this for the biographical details given above.
3. A summary by Toril Moi, pp. 99–101 in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (Methuen, 1985).
4. The critique of Lacan, chapter five 'The mirror stage – a critical reflection', pp. 131–63 in Raymond Tallis's *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (Macmillan, 1988).

The most important Lacanian text for literary students is 'The insistence of the letter', first delivered in 1957 to a 'lay' audience of philosophy students, rather than to trainee psychiatrists, but using material from the professional seminars. In what follows I attempt a summary of the argument, trying to show why these ideas have been used so intensively by literary critics.

Lacan begins the piece by paying allegiance to the intellectual dominance of language studies: he asks (rhetorically) 'how could a psychoanalyst of today not realise that his realm of truth is in fact the word?' Language, then, is central, and this is so because in investigating the unconscious the analyst is always both using and examining language – in effect, Freudian psychiatry is entirely a verbal science. And the unconscious is not a chaotic mass of disparate material, as might formerly have been thought, but an orderly network, as complex as the structure of a language: 'what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language'.

So the unconscious, in Lacan's famous slogan, is structured like a language. But how is a language structured? Modern language studies, he goes on, begin with Saussure, who shows that meaning in language is a matter of contrasts between words and other words, not between words and things. Meaning, that is to say, is a network of differences. There is a perpetual barrier between signifier (the word) and signified (the referent). He demonstrates this built-in separation with a diagram showing two identical lavatory doors, one headed 'Ladies' the other 'Gentlemen'. This purports to show that the same signifier may have different signifieds, so that (Lodge, p. 86) 'only the correlations between signifier and signifier supply the standard for all research into meaning'. Hence, 'we are forced to accept the

notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (Lodge, p. 87). That is, words and meanings have a life of their own and constantly override and obscure the supposed simplicities and clarity of external reality. If signifiers relate only to one another, then language is detached from external reality, and becomes an independent realm, a crucial notion in post-structuralist thinking (see Chapter 3, pp. 61–2).

But what evidence is there that the unconscious is 'linguistic' in structure as Lacan alleges? He argues that the two 'dream work' mechanisms identified by Freud, *condensation* and *displacement* (this chapter, pp. 94–5) correspond to the basic poles of language identified by the linguist Roman Jakobson, that is, to *metaphor* and *metonymy*, respectively. The correspondence is that:

1. In metonymy one thing represents another by means of the part standing for the whole. So twenty sail would mean twenty ships. In Freudian dream interpretation an element in a dream might stand for something else by *displacement*: so, a person might be represented by one of their attributes; for instance, a lover who is Italian might be represented in a dream by, let's say, an Alfa Romeo car. Lacan says this is the same as *metonymy*, the part standing for the whole.
2. In *condensation* several things might be compressed into one symbol, just as a *metaphor* like 'the ship ploughed the waves' condenses into a single item two different images, the ship cutting through the sea and the plough cutting through the soil.

The use by the unconscious of these linguistic means of self-expression is part of Lacan's evidence for the claim that the unconscious is structured like a language. He goes on to emphasise the linguistic aspect of Freud's work: whenever the unconscious is being discussed the amount of linguistic analysis increases, since puns, allusions, and other kinds of word play are often the mechanisms which make manifest the content of the unconscious – think back to the 'aliquis' example, for instance.

The transition section of the essay moves attention again from the conscious self, which has always been regarded as the primary self, to the unconscious as 'the kernel of our being'. In Western philosophy the conscious mind has long been regarded as the essence of



selfhood. This view is encapsulated in the proclamation by the philosopher Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am'. Lacan lays down a dramatic challenge to this philosophical consensus (remember that he is addressing an audience of philosophy students) when he reverses this into 'I am where I think not' (Lodge, p. 97), that is, in the unconscious, where my true selfhood lies. Lacan insists, then, that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious be followed through to its logical conclusion, which is 'the self's radical ex-centricity to itself' (Lodge, p. 101). And he asks 'who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me?' (Lodge, p. 102). Hence, the self is 'deconstructed', shown to be merely a linguistic effect, not an essential entity. The unconscious, then, is the 'kernel of our being', but the unconscious is like a language, and language exists as a structure before the individual enters into it. Hence, the liberal humanist notion of unique, individual selfhood is deconstructed. The argument, then, is extremely ambitious and wide-ranging in its effects. In a few pages Lacan seeks to alter nothing less than our deepest notions of what we are.

But why, in particular, is it of such interest to literary critics? I think the answer to this question is a consequence of the relentless logic of the views put forward in the essay. Thus, Lacan says that the unconscious is the 'kernel of our being', but since the unconscious is linguistic, and language is a system already complete and in existence before we enter into it, then it follows that the notion of a unique, separate self is deconstructed. If this is so, the idea of 'character', which rests in turn on the notion of a unique separate self, becomes untenable. So a major consequence of accepting the Lacanian position would be to reject the conventional view of characterisation in literature. Since Lacan deconstructs the idea of the subject as a stable amalgam of consciousness, we can hardly accept novelistic characters as people but must hold them in abeyance, as it were, and see them as assemblages of signifiers clustering round a proper name. Hence, a wholly different reading strategy is demanded.

Further, the view of language offered by Lacan sees it as fundamentally detached from any referent in the world. Accepting this view leads to a rejection of literary realism, since in realist novels the underlying assumption is that the text figures forth the real world

for us. Hence, adopting the Lacanian outlook would involve valuing instead the modernist or postmodernist experimental, fragmented, allusive text, where, for instance, a novel plays with the devices of the novel, alludes to other novels, and so on, just as, for Saussure, the signifiers which make up a language refer only to one another, and interact with one another, but do not figure forth a world. Hence, a wholly different set of literary preferences is also demanded.

Lacan's foregrounding of the unconscious leads him to speculate about the mechanism whereby we emerge into consciousness. Before the sense of self emerges the young child exists in a realm which Lacan calls the Imaginary, in which there is no distinction between self and Other and there is a kind of idealised identification with the mother. Then, between six months and eighteen months comes what he calls the 'mirror-stage', when the child sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive of itself as a unified being, separate from the rest of the world. At this stage the child enters into the language system, essentially a system which is concerned with lack and separation – crucial Lacanian concepts – since language names what is not present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it. This stage also marks the beginning of socialisation, with its prohibitions and restraints, associated with the figure of the father. The new order which the child now enters is called by Lacan the Symbolic. This distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic has been used extensively in literary studies, for instance, by French feminist critics (see Chapter 6, p. 124). In terms of the literary polarisation between the realist and the anti-realist text, the Symbolic realm would have to be seen as the one found in realist literature, a world of patriarchal order and logic. By contrast, the anti-realist text represents the realm of the Imaginary, a world in which language gestures beyond itself, beyond logic and grammar, rather in the way that poetic language often does. Indeed, the contrast between the Imaginary and the Symbolic might be seen as analogous to that between poetry and prose. In practice the two realms, and the two kinds of language, must always co-exist, and the critical stance which follows from an acceptance of the Lacanian outlook will involve a preference for the kind of literary text in which there are constant irruptions of the Imaginary into the Symbolic, as in the kind of 'metafiction' or 'magic realism' in which the novel undercuts and

queries its own realism. A fine example of this kind of work would be that of the British novelist B. S. Johnson, whose constant textual inventiveness takes the form, for instance, of moments when the characters cross-question the author, taking issue with his version of their motives, or his handling of the plots in which they figure. Hence, apparently abstract Lacanian notions, such as the constructedness and instability of the subject (the self), or the subject as a linguistic construct, or language as a self-contained universe of discourse can be seen in action in the texture of the work of fiction.

#### What Lacanian critics do

1. Like Freudian critics they pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings, but instead of excavating for those of the author or characters, they search out those of the text itself, uncovering contradictory undercurrents of meaning, which lie like a subconscious beneath the 'conscious' of the text. This is another way of defining the process of 'deconstruction'.
2. They demonstrate the presence in the literary work of Lacanian psychoanalytic symptoms or phases, such as the mirror-stage or the sovereignty of the unconscious.
3. They treat the literary text in terms of a series of broader Lacanian orientations, towards such concepts as lack or desire, for instance.
4. They see the literary text as an enactment or demonstration of Lacanian views about language and the unconscious, particularly the endemic elusiveness of the signified, and the centrality of the unconscious. In practice, this results in favouring the anti-realist text which challenges the conventions of literary representation.

#### Lacanian criticism: an example

To illustrate some of the concerns of a Lacanian approach to literature we can now look briefly at Lacan's well-known interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's pioneering detective story 'The Purloined Letter'. (The tale is included in the Penguin *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Writings*, ed. David Galloway, and also reprinted in *The Purloined Poe*.)

Lacan analysed this story in a series of 'seminars', as part of the induction process for trainee analysts. In the 1980s several post-structuralist essays were written in response to the publication of these seminars, and much of the material has usefully been collected and republished in *The Purloined Poe*. Also, Newton's *Theory into Practice* contains an essay on the topic by the Lacanian psychoanalytic critic Shoshana Felman. Since it is by Lacan himself, this example demonstrates the fourth of the Lacanian critical activities listed above, Lacan finding in it evidence of his own views on language, and on the process of psychoanalysis.

Poe's story has about it an archetypal air which lends itself well to psychoanalytic interpretation. There is no in-depth characterisation, the characters being suggestive of chess pieces which are moved about by the author in a ritualistic combat of bluff, counter-bluff, and subterfuge. They are named the Queen, the King, the Minister, the Chief of Police and Dupin, the detective. What happens can be divided into four phases:

1. The Minister is in discussion with the Queen in her apartments when the King enters unexpectedly. He notices that she is anxious the King should not see a letter which is on the desk, but she can't conceal it as this would draw his attention to it. When the attention of both is distracted the Minister removes it, substituting a letter from his own pocket which has a similar appearance.
2. When she discovers the theft the Queen realises who is responsible, and when the Minister is away she gets the Chief of Police and his men to search his apartments. In spite of employing the most thorough and scientific methods they find nothing.
3. In desperation she asks for Dupin's help. He visits the Minister and reasons that carrying the letter on his person would be too great a risk, but its usefulness lies in his being able to produce it at any time, so it can't be hidden outside the house. But if it had been *hidden* inside the house the search would have discovered it, so it must be in the house but not hidden. Sure enough, he sees the letter above the mantelpiece, carelessly pushed in amongst other items of correspondence.
4. He visits again, and having arranged a distraction in the street, substitutes a fake letter for it. The letter is returned to the

Queen, and the Minister, unaware that he no longer possesses it, brings about his own downfall. A note inside the fake reveals that this is Dupin's revenge for being duped by the Minister in a love affair in earlier life.

Lacan's account of the tale is lengthy, but of markedly different character from the conventional Freudian criticism of Poe, which is best represented by the work of Freud's 1930s disciple Marie Bonaparte (also extracted in *The Purloined Poe*). In Bonaparte the tale is read, as are all Poe's works, as a symptom of the author's neurotic inner life. Thus, she reads beyond the text to the author, identifying in him a mother fixation and necrophilia on the basis of the content of the tales. Lacan, by contrast, does not talk about the psychology of the individual author, but sees the text as a metaphor which throws light upon aspects of the unconscious, on the nature of psychoanalysis, and on aspects of language. We can summarise these as follows:

1. *The stolen letter is an emblem of the unconscious itself.* In the story we find out nothing about the *content* of the letter: we merely see it affecting the actions of every person in the tale. Likewise, the content of the unconscious is, by definition, unknowable, but everything we do is affected by it: we can guess at the nature of this content by observing its effects, just as we can deduce the general nature of the letter's contents from the anxiety it generates. Freud's investigations resulted in confident assertions about the precise nature of the content of the unconscious, but Lacan is much more sceptical about the possibility of such certainties. Like the letter, the pieces which might make sense of our inner mental universe have been purloined, and we have to learn to operate without them. We have, that is, to use the code without having the key.
2. *Dupin's investigation of the crime of the stolen letter enacts the process of psychoanalysis.* The analyst in psychoanalysis uses repetition and substitution: in getting the patient to verbalise painful repressed memories, the original event is repeated in verbal form, but the verbal account is then substituted in the conscious mind for the repressed memory in the unconscious. Once it is conscious and verbalised, the memory is disempowered and

mental well-being is restored. Likewise, Dupin's investigative process in the story centres on repetition and substitution: his theft of the letter from the Minister is a repetition of the Minister's theft of it from the Queen, and the theft in both cases is achieved by substitution, a false letter being used as a replacement for the real one.

3. *The letter with the unknown content is an embodiment of aspects of the nature of language.* In language there is an endless play of signifiers, but no simple connection with any signified content beyond language. The signified is always lost or purloined. In the same way, we see the significance of the letter throughout the story, but we never find out precisely what is signified within it. It is an example of signification itself, not a sign of some specific thing. Likewise, all words are purloined letters: we can never open them and view their content unambiguously; we have the signifiers, which are the verbal envelopes of concepts, so to speak, but these envelopes cannot be unsealed, so that the signifieds will always remain hidden, just like the content of the purloined letter in Poe's tale.

Comparing the Freudian and Lacanian examples discussed in this chapter will make it immediately apparent that there is an immense gulf between these two approaches, even though – paradoxically – they both stem from the same original body of Freudian theory.

### Selected reading

#### General

Ellmann, Maud, ed. *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* (Longman, 1994).

A useful collection, showing the influence of Freud and Lacan on criticism.

Felman, Shoshana, ed. *Literature and Psychoanalysis – The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

An important collection of essays. Felman's own 'Turning the screw of interpretation' is about Henry James's story 'The Turn of the Screw', one of the earliest texts to be subjected to psychoanalytic criticism (by the critic Edmund Wilson in 1934).

Jefferson, Ann and Robey, David, eds, *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (Batsford, 2nd edn, 1986). Chapter five 'Modern psychoanalytic criticism'.

A useful general account, not restricted to Freud.