

# INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETIVE THEORY

## COURSE DESCRIPTION:

It is not immediately apparent what psychoanalysis adds to interpretive theory in general. Certainly the phrase 'psychoanalytic interpretation' means something to most people as it tends to evoke the customary image of the Freudian clinic, complete with the wise, grey-haired analyst sitting with pad and pencil dutifully inscribing the utterances of the patient reposed before him on the couch; it might even elicit the more learned response of how the analyst interprets the patient's symptoms by attending to the text of the patient's speech. But when it comes to 'texts' as they are usually taken – whether these are classic philosophical or aesthetic works of the past or significant ones of the present – the question of just what their *psychoanalytic* interpretation involves proves much more difficult to articulate.

Of course this has not hindered psychoanalytic interpretation. It continues to flourish, after having initially proceeded down a path Freud himself opened with his own literary analyses and the founding of clinical 'complexes' on literary models. Yet subsequent literary criticism has so fragmented his efforts that little agreement exists today on just what psychoanalytic interpretation entails. For some, assessing the motives of a text's author through an analysis of his biography is primary; others 'psychologize' a text's fictional characters or its reader's responses; still others analyze the symbols in a text in an effort to unearth latent meanings. About the only thing these approaches seem to have in common is that they all tend to conceive the text as a product of the unconscious.

This course offers an alternative assessment of psychoanalytic interpretation by returning to the founding texts of Freud and Lacan. Found there are two distinct theories of textual analysis readily understandable through the established interpretive traditions of hermeneutical phenomenology and structuralism. These two theories alone can largely account for much of the *ad hoc* interpretation which takes place today in the name of psychoanalysis. But often overlooked is a third theory capable of submitting the text to a radical interpretation by making use of a nonsensical element first theorized to exist by Lacan. By examining these three psychoanalytic interpretive theories, it is hoped that students will gain a greater appreciation for this element, one that is said to provide the key to textual meaning.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION:

Students are expected to have read the required reading for each week and to contribute substantively to class discussion. Each student is required to give one class presentation which introduces the reading for the week and promotes discussion by drawing upon additional texts to broaden the scope of the material. (A list of recommended secondary source material and commentaries on each week's reading will be provided in class). A 30 page essay is further required which critically evaluates and employs an aspect of psychoanalytic theory in the interpretation of a text of the student's choosing. Material from the class presentation may be leveraged for the essay if desired.

Participation	10%
Presentation	10%
Essay (30pp)	80%

## OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE:

**Week 1:** Introduction

### I SIGMUND FREUD

**Week 2:** Hysteria

**Week 3:** Obsessional Neurosis

**Week 4:** The Interpretation of Dreams

**Week 5:** Freudian Aesthetic Theory

### II. JACQUES LACAN

**Week 6:** The Imaginary Lacan (1933–mid 1950s): Hermeneutical Phenomenology

**Week 7:** The Symbolic Lacan (mid 1950s–1960s): Structuralism

**Week 8:** The Symbolic Lacan (mid 1950s–1960s): Structuralism

**Week 9:** The Symbolic Lacan (mid 1950s–1960s): Structuralism

**Week 10:** The Real Lacan (1960s–1981): Non-Hermeneutical Phenomenology

**Week 11:** The Real Lacan (1960s–1981): Non-Hermeneutical Phenomenology

**Week 12:** The Real Lacan (1960s–1981): Non-Hermeneutical Phenomenology

## COURSE DETAILS WEEK-BY-WEEK:

**Week 1:** Introduction

- discussion of the course aims, requirements, method of evaluation and expectations
- discussion of the overall trajectory of the course material, both at the level of the three theories of textual analysis to be explored and at the level of the particular topics and texts which compose each of the individual weeks

## I. SIGMUND FREUD

### **Week 2: Hysteria**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Freud began a series of dialogues with hysterical patients. But the results of these dialogues go well beyond the particulars of their cases. For in following the path of their desire he made the ego-deflating discovery of the existence of the unconscious and thereby founded the new science of psychoanalysis. This path, however, did not lead directly to such discoveries. At least initially he attempted to stay ahead of the hysterical game by rationally explaining to his patients their problems and soon became frustrated that a cure was not thereby affected. With hindsight he had become entangled in sexual difference, a riddle destined to perplex him for the remainder of his life. The case of Dora is paradigmatic, illustrating the privileged structure of hysteria and the problems it poses for the interpreter. When his patient Dora reports how her father turned her into an object of exchange, offering her to Mr. K so her father could pursue an affair with Mrs. K, Freud endeavors to confront Dora with her own complicity in this exchange to no avail. Decades later Lacan will re-examine this case to expose how Freud's operative notion of natural (and not normative) heterosexuality led to his erroneous belief that Dora's hysteria stems from a refusal to acknowledge a secret desire for Mrs. K. What is revealed is how Dora identifies with Mr. K, taking as her own the desire which she perceives him to have for Mrs. K.

#### Required Reading:

Freud, Sigmund. *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII, pp. 15-111 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1905])

### **Week 3: Obsessional Neurosis**

Deemed a 'dialect' of hysteria, obsessional neurosis is exemplarily illustrated with the 'Rat man,' a nickname Freud gave to the patient of one of his cases which seemingly calls for a different interpretive technique. Freud suspected that the compulsive rituals and obsessive thoughts troubling his patient were composed by and followed a certain logical route and one which could be traced out by an analysis conducted at the level of the (German) words or signifiers used to speak of the case. Once this was done it could easily be seen how many of the signifiers which represented essential elements of the case, such as 'installments' (*Raten*), 'to marry' (*hieraten*) and 'gambler' (*spielratte*), revolved around the central, defining or master signifier of 'rats' (*Ratten*).

#### Required Reading:

Freud, Sigmund. *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. X, pp. 151-318 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1909])

#### **Week 4: The Interpretation of Dreams**

The basis of the clinical analyses of patients is rooted in a work many consider Freud's single greatest achievement, a book on dream interpretation initially published in 1900. As he famously writes, 'The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind;' that is, what is learned from dream analysis can be applied to any product of human activity insofar as it is unconsciously produced. Thus his proposal to treat the dream in an unheard of way, as a text, has the further implication that the neuroses can also be considered texts which can be read (as clearly demonstrated by his analysis of the Rat man). With respect to questions of methodology, three fundamentally different attitudes to texts are discernible in this book, each of which results in its own unique approach to textual analysis. The first is a hermeneutical phenomenological type of approach consistent with Freud's discoveries which definitively establish for the first time that a dream has a (deep and hidden) meaning. Yet everywhere it is clear he interprets dreams predominately as a structuralist, proceeding from the signifiers the dreamer assigns to the meaning-laden dream images and not from these images themselves. But not to be overlooked is a subversive third level of analysis consistent with his theory that a nonsensical 'navel' attends to every dream such that if extracted, the entire dream and its meaningful content unravel.

##### Required Reading:

Freud, Sigmund. "Chapter II: The Method of Interpreting Dreams: An Analysis of a Specimen Dream" in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vols. IV and V, pp. 96-121 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1900])

#### **Week 5: Freudian Aesthetic Theory**

In his dream book Freud discovered the navel of the dream which indexes an element both nonsensical and something which provides the key to all the other meaningful elements in the dream. In another essay investigating our subjective experience of the 'uncanny,' he effectively identifies a similar element. The essay in question is one of Freud's first in aesthetic theory, an area he feels compelled to weigh in on precisely because it has hitherto neglected to account for this particular experience. First an etymology of the word itself is provided. Then, through the analyses of his own experiences of encountering his 'double' and relating odd phenomena like coming across the same thing numerous times in a single day or finding oneself in novel situations which nevertheless seem secretly familiar, Freud offers his theory: the uncanny experience is linked to a compulsion to repeat. Finally, brief interpretations of classic literature are offered and contrasted with real-life scenarios, to conclude with a definition: the uncanny is deemed to be something that should have remained hidden yet nevertheless has come to light, or else might be conceived as that which has undergone repression and then returned from it.

##### Required Reading:

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII, pp. 219-52 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1919])

## II. JACQUES LACAN

### **Week 6:** The Imaginary Lacan (1933–mid 1950s): Hermeneutical Phenomenology

More clearly than in the case of Freud, the work of Lacan can be characterized according to the three different approaches to textual analysis articulated by hermeneutical phenomenology, structuralism and non-hermeneutical phenomenology. In fact, his entire career can be divided into three corresponding periods. The first culminates in a paper from 1953 commonly known as his Rome Discourse. This paper bears the distinct mark of Heidegger, the founding father of hermeneutical phenomenology. For instance, there is the call to restore the censored chapters of a subject's history through a concerted focus on the Word and the symbolization in being. However, as is always the case with Lacan, this paper contains many hints of future theoretical developments.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 197-268 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1953])

### **Week 7:** The Symbolic Lacan (mid 1950s–1960s): Structuralism

Lacan's second period is his most well-known and his paper from 1956 is favored among English departments of higher academia on account of its brilliant structural analysis of Poe's short story. But often overlooked is the second half of the paper which addresses the underlying mechanism accounting for such structural movements in general; there one finds a scientific exposition on the ciphering matrices that Lacan argues make up the unconscious and grant it a certain autonomy to its functioning.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 6-48 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1956])

### **Week 8:** The Symbolic Lacan (mid 1950s–1960s): Structuralism

A full theory of signifiers is only first worked out in a paper from 1957. Within an overall effort to set aside meaning for signifying structure, it is here Lacan famously inverts the order of Saussure's linguistic sign and adds an intervening bar; theorizes how the 'button tie' momentarily anchors down the incessant slide of meaning; and professes his faith that only by working in the realm of signifiers can the subject be separated from his alienating immersion in meaning.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 412-41 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1957])

### **Week 9: The Symbolic Lacan (mid 1950s–1960s): Structuralism**

In 1958 Lacan begins to draw a distinction between the phallus *qua* signified and phallus *qua* signifier. The latter is necessary to any differential signifying system as it designates meaning-effects as a whole; the lack of possessing it is the price to be paid for any meaningful experience. Here also originates an earlier (and later abandoned) attempt to formulize sexual difference as internal to phallic economy.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. "The Signification of the Phallus" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 575-84 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1958])

### **Week 10: The Real Lacan (1960s–1981): Non-Hermeneutical Phenomenology**

Discernible in Lacan's final period is an effort to theorize interpretive strategies constructed around the purported existence of a nonsensical object which acts as the very cause of signifying systems and is responsible for disruptions in textual meaning. In 1964 he achieves a full break from Heidegger by positing a separation of being and meaning and begins to incorporate topology into his seminars.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, pp.203-15, 244-76 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998 [1964])

### **Week 11: The Real Lacan (1960s–1981): Non-Hermeneutical Phenomenology**

The last seminar conducted in the 1960s introduces the Theory of the Four Discourses which clarify the link between the nonsensical object and signifying chains and thus further disassociate Lacan from both hermeneutical phenomenology and structuralism. Taking advantage of how there is no sexual relation, what the analyst's discourse puts into practice is nothing short of the suspension of meaning.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, pp. 11-53 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007 [1969-70])

### **Week 12: The Real Lacan (1960s–1981): Non-Hermeneutical Phenomenology**

Lacan's thoughts surrounding sexual difference culminate with his Formulae of Sexuation most famously introduced in his twentieth seminar. Often overlooked is how these formulae readily lend themselves to diverse fields of thought precisely because they are written as logical propositions. The textual field is apparently no exception, as Lacan expressly states how even *meaning is sexual*.

#### Required Reading:

Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX, Encore 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 78-100 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998 [1975])

## Required Texts:

- Freud, Sigmund. *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII, pp. 1-122 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1905])
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vols. IV and V (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1900])
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. X, pp. 151-318 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1909])
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The 'Uncanny'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII, pp. 219-52 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958 [1919])
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 197-268 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1953])
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 412-41 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1957])
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998 [1964])
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007 [1969-70])
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX, Encore 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998 [1975])
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 6-48 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1956])
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Signification of the Phallus" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, pp. 575-84 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006 [1958])