

August Seminar 2019  
NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

*Date: Wednesday 26 August 2019*

*Time: 6-8 pm*

*Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade*

## **Lacanian Aesthetics and Four Paradigms of Literary Criticism**

**Dr Ehsan Azari Stanizai**

As a great connoisseur of aesthetics, Lacan extensively analyzed arts and read literature and used them as his guide and a trusted source of knowledge and illustration for the developing and formalization of his psychoanalytic theories. His observation was mainly centered on aesthetics as being both the object of literature and also the origin of the underlying creative process that make a piece of writing and text as a literary art. Lacan's theories of aesthetics unravel the problems related to issues such as beauty, its essence, the beautiful and the way of understanding and interpreting them. In the same way, Lacan's approach to literature and its interpretation is ingenious and diverse. Every time Lacan writes on literature, literary creation and aesthetics, his response is aimed at demystifying these categories.

Lacan defines art in its close relation with his concept of *Das Ding* or the 'Thing' borrowed from Freud and Heidegger, which means the thing in itself and for itself and inassimilable in language in a Kantian sense. In his seminar on *the Ethics of Psychoanalysis* he argues that art and beauty is organized around that as it was said due to its un-assimilation in language, the Thing that in language irreducibly persists as a void, emptiness, absence, lack and a hole. The Thing which is a key concept in his psychoanalysis remains as an indestructible and primordial object of the unconscious desire which is beyond articulation in the symbolic register. It is a signifier without signified that must be continually refined in the metonymy of desire. This unknown x as Lacan calls it is in the meantime the cause and object of desire

in the same time. The thing as such is idealized as what Lacan calls the ideal-ego and the specular image in the imaginary register. A work of art involves always encircling the Thing. The concept of the Thing its central role in art is summarized by Žižek as, “Lacan claims that art is always organized around the central Void of the impossible-real Thing- a statement which, perhaps, should be read as a variation of Rilke’s old thesis that ‘Beauty is the last veil that covers the Horrible.’”

Lacan traces the cause and origin of literary creation and creativity in the imaginary register through which a human subject structure his identification through a process of visual engagement and interaction with image from outside in the Mirror Stage. This engagement leads up to the formation, idealization and consecrating of the specular image or that ideal-ego.

Specular image is, in fact, the image of one’s own body in the mirror. By identification with this image which essentially is foreign to his being, the subject constructs his ego. This process in the mirror stage enables a human subject to imitate gestures of the other person and internalization as his own. The specular image which comes from outside changed into his own narcissistic self-image, which has a captivating power over the subject. The subject in return projects this image of his own body onto all other objects in the world around him. This identification takes place on the ground of a dialectical relationship between the ego and its interlocutor or double in the mirror, namely specular image. This involves a process of captivation, where a human subject is interjecting the image and then projecting his own body onto the outside world. Lacan identifies this dialectical relationship with the mirror stage that constitutes the subject’s desire in the imaginary register. In the case of an artist or writer, the drama of the imaginary desire is re-enacted in the symbolic order of culture. The passion involved in the literary invention and in the lead up to it for Lacan was the action of affectively recharged signs or symbols. The affect on its part, as Lacan indicates, is derived from the relationship between the subject and the Other in the Symbolic, which is displaced. The affective, according to Lacan is not opposite an intellectual accounting. The affect is nonetheless, not a signifier but a signal that is directed to that dialectical relationship. Lacan concludes that a literary invention is a result of the inmixing of all factors, namely the subject, affective passion and the re-enactment of primary identification of the imaginary into the symbolic order.

Lacan argues against the notion of arts as imitation. He takes the issue with Plato and argues that art cannot be an imitation, because the real according to Plato is only the idea and every artefact is the imitation of an idea. If art imitates, it will be the imitation of imitation or shadow of a shadow. Lacan disputes the notion of imitation in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* by presenting two works of modernist painters, Van Gogh and Cézanne.

As Cézanne's painting, *Four Apples*, shows the painter imitates the object but in the meantime changes the object which is supposed to represent as Lacan puts it, "at the moment when Cézanne paints his apples, it is clear that in painting those apples, he is doing something very different from imitating apples—even though his final manner of imitating them, which is the most striking, is primarily oriented toward a technique of presenting the object."

With Van Gogh's painting "the Shoes," Lacan makes it clear that imitation is not at issue because the painting represents the object which is worn out and unusable? The shoes represent the object which is abandoned and is merely a waste to be thrown in a rubbish-bin. The emptiness, nothingness, and death the painting is unfolding are substitutes for that Thing around which the art constitutes itself. Lacan also uses the potter's Vase as a metaphor for art and beauty. The vase is also made around a hole and emptiness. The Van Gogh's Shoes "made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the centre of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation presents itself as a nihil, as nothing."<sup>121</sup>ethics

Lacan's theory of aesthetic is different from Freud's in so far as Freud defines aesthetics as the pleasure we are getting from reading a literary work. In "Writing and Day-Dreaming," Freud argues that the very pleasure that the author offers to his readers is the aesthetic pleasure, as he writes, "the writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formed term that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies."<sup>141</sup>Fpenguin Lacan returns to Freud when the latter deciphers aesthetics in his influential essay "The Uncanny" as the "theory of qualities of feeling". As this essay reveals, Freud's aesthetic does not necessarily mean pleasure. As such the pain and suffering are also not extraneous to aesthetics. Despite Lacan's disagreement with Plato on imitation, his theory of aesthetics is rooted in Plato. In Plato's *Symposium*, there is a shadowy woman from Manteneia, Diotima whose

ideas are known to us from Socrates's speech. Socrates calls her his instructress and a wise woman beyond measure which taught him the essence of beauty and love. Socrates recalls that the beauty is absolute, transcendental, and it is in all its manifestations related to the same family. It remains impersonal and distinct from any object imaginable. Beauty is "absolute, existing alone with ideal, unique external to all other beautiful things...in its essence. Pure and unalloyed, divine beauty exists apart and alone."

The interesting thing in Diotema's statement is the notion of the accessibility of the beauty to a human being. If an individual develops certain sensuous faculties and reflective power of aesthetic judgement, he or she can experience it. This accessibility is defined in terms of pre-Socratician mystical unification with God. This debate in *the Symposium* is the first inquiry into the essence of aesthetics in Western philosophy that opens the door for the idea that the feeling and experience and even production of beauty could be a subjective phenomenon.

Lacan literary theory and criticism is also radically different from classical psychoanalysis. Lacan rejects Freud's theories of sublimation (a process in which streams of libidinal energies are redirected towards more socially and cultural accepted and admirable forms such as arts and literature), psychobiography (which suggests that the author is the determinant of the work of art and the deduction of textual knowledge from the neurosis of the author). Lacan also does not subscribe to the Freudian notion that a literary text like a dream was simply a simulacrum of the unconscious of the author. He was also against the applied psychoanalysis and the notion that a work of art should be treated like a patient on the couch.

The insights from Lacan's theory of the subject and language began to snowball in literary studies before its acceptance in psychoanalysis. His theory of the subject put an end to the Western metaphysical romanticizing the subject as unitary and autonomous. He refused Cartesian Cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am into I think where I am not therefore I am where I am not thinking). For Lacan a subject was the effect of the signifier, and a decentered mass of traces. After he was constituted by language, a subject can sustain itself by his desire in a closed and differential system of language.

These theories have become an integral part of Roland Barthes's critical repertoire who wrote several books on the basis of Lacanian theories of subject, desire and *jouissance*. He

based his concepts such as the death of the author and the birth of the reader, pleasure of the texts and textual desire on the theories of Lacan.

Lacan's literary theory is aligned with post-structuralist literary theory that engages itself with the literary works in two major ways. Firstly, like other theorists, Lacan is painstakingly trying to draw parallels between his own theoretical concepts and themes and the knowledge that is already presented in literature in a fictional and poetic articulation. The knowledge that each literary works tries to dramatize is what Lacan calls the unknown knowledge in a literary text.

Second, Lacan shows much interest in illustrating his theories by means of literature and art. This is what Derrida is dealing with Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* and sees the endgame of the strategy of his deconstruction in Joyce's text. Michel Foucault's engagement with the history of sexuality in Hellenistic culture and Deleuze & Guattaries' with Kafka are all in truth in pursuit of illustrating and supporting their own theoretical taxonomies.

Lacan literary criticism begins and ends with the text. Every literary element from a textual tropic network to character and genre and setting has a role to play in a literary and artistic signifying process. This teleological approach to literature and its elements is a major factor that prevents us from drawing a common denominator for Lacanian critique of literature. For every literary text call for its own idiosyncratic way of interpretation. In other words, each text and work of art determines its interpretive methodology. Given this typical feature of Lacanian literary criticism, I present here a number of key Lacanian theoretical paradigms and a number of exemplary literary texts with which Lacan was himself engaged analytically.

Thus, to have a concrete view of different Lacanian literary paradigms, the chapter ends with a summary of Lacan's own engagement with a series of crucial literary texts: Poe's "Purloined Letter," as well as with Derrida's criticism of Lacan's interpretation of Poe's story, Duras' *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, and Sophocles' *Antigone*. This chapter attempts, on the one hand, to offer a kaleidoscopic orientation of Lacan vis-à-vis the literary, and, on the other, to answer the always-asked question: how does Lacan read a literary text? "Reading literature" as Marini argues, "made him [Lacan] think...it made him invent," new psychoanalytic theories (Marini, 1992, 88). Lacan himself writes, "[p]oetic creations *engender*, rather than *simply* reflect, psychological creation" (Lacan, 1996a, 197).

In the following brief critical sketches, we will see how Lacan considers the internal values of the text at hand as a determining element in selecting a critical model of inquiry. We will see how Lacan chooses his critical models on the basis of the thematic and structural imperatives of the text. Barthes wrote in “What is Criticism” that “[c]riticism is not at all a table of results or body of judgments, it is essentially an activity, i.e., a series of intellectual acts” (Barthes, 2006, 5). Indeed, analyzing a text for Lacan was an intellectual activity (requiring an eye) with an eye for discovering what literature does and what it says. Lacan also shows that his theories have been far from a list of prototypical models, or coercive and judgmental doctrines. His critique of Poe is above all an attack on biography-centered analysis. And his primary attention in his work on Marguerite Duras and Sophocles, in so far as literary criticism is concerned, is focused on the affinity of psychoanalysis and literature. He emphasizes that a writer and literature are the true masters, for they precede psychoanalysis.

In all the three texts here Lacan draws on multiple interpretive models pertinent to their textual signifying networks. As Poe’s text shows, for Lacan everything that has a role in the production of literary text, from plot, to genre, from style to non-verbal gestures, and from characterisation to narrative, all were an inseparable part of the overall textual system. Poe’s text calls for a critical model that addresses the circulation of the signifier in the unconscious and the subjection and subordination of the subject to the governing signifier. This text for Lacan was an allegory of the unconscious and its linguistic processes in relation to human subjectivity. Thus Lacan analyses Poe’s tale in light of the formation of the unconscious, and the insistence of the letter within it. Lacan draws meaning in this text from textual moments, showing a disjunction between the referential points and the signification of the word “letter.” Literally the letter here refers to a postal letter. However, the signification it produces is the alphabetical letter in the unconscious. The acquisition of the signifier marks the entry of the subject into language so that it represents a subject for another signifier. In this context, Lacan renounces the critical approaches of Freud and Marie Bonaparte, who were seeking psychoanalytic truth from outside the literary text. Duras’ text offers a visual field in which desire comes into play. The return of the primary scene plays a central role in this novel. The visual fantasy of the first scene of love embodies this primary scene that

recurs everywhere in the novel. The protagonist of the novel is a woman who internalised her traumatic experience, her fiancé leaving her for another woman. This episode takes place in Paris, where she finds herself in the same city again with her new lover, experiencing uncanny feelings—specular capture. She is repeating the voyeuristic scenes of love. Lacan sets out on an exhaustive discussion of the genre of tragedy in the Greek dramatic tradition before analysing *Antigone*. We notice in Lacan's text on *Antigone*, a portrayal of literary Lacan, for he gives an in-depth analysis of tragedy as a classical literary genre. He sees in the play the structural affinities between desire and the law.

This section will illustrate our proposition that Lacan laid emphasis on the way intrinsic values contribute to a critic's decision as to what model of inquiry has to be applied. We can trace here the extensibility between two discourses, literary and critical, and in a nutshell, how a literary discourse generates psychoanalytic metadiscourse on the basis of Lacanian literary praxis

### **1. The Purloined Letter: *'the Letter in Sufferance'***

Lacan understands Poe's tale as inherently theoretical, a living example of what he defines as psychoanalytic theorization on the part of literature. He detects psychoanalysis as already at play in the tale. Therefore, he treats every part of the fiction, the characters and dramatic features of the tale as a fictionalized version of the truth, and a larger than life psychoanalytic drama. The detective Dupin represents the real Poe who is a reincarnation of the analyst, the poet, for he knows very well the location where the letter must be hidden. He finds the letter, because, as an analyst, he knows the letter as the signifier that contains the Queen's desire and its intersubjective importance in relation to her desire. This intersubjectivity within the discourse of desire that, according to Lacan, Poe offers in the plot structure of the short story constitutes the major point of his interest. Lacan also attempts to clarify his own theory of truth as an arbitrary function in fiction. He comments, "[a]side from reservation, a fictive tale even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity more purely to the extent that we may believe its conception arbitrary" (Lacan, 1988b, 29). Lacan doesn't drop the literary and technical aspects of the story from sight. He makes references to genre,

hero, and the structure of the tale. For him, Poe's tale is an exemplary detective story with a unique dramatic value and effect. No one knows, for example, who is the sender of the letter. Why do the Queen and then the minister leave the letter in the open? Why does the Queen feel guilty once the letter is stolen? In conventional detective fiction, as Lacan argues, the criminal's details would become clear to the reader right from the start. The two scenes are structurally alike but narrated differently. The first scene unfolds like a drama without description, whereas the second one is described and narrated. The story has several narrators and the narration is, in fact, symbolic. The chief narrator symbolizes Poe himself, which is why he is dropped in Lacan's interpretation, something for which Derrida criticized Lacan. The following aspects of the story's relation to psychoanalysis should be emphasized.

Like the analysand's discourse, in Poe, the truth about unconscious desire shows itself most of the time as a fiction, and thus as a piece of forged craftsmanship. This truth is about desire, and according to Lacan, literary discourse may well be the best site for the revelation of desire, as he says in *Écrits*: "[i]t is from speech that truth receives the mark that establishes it in a fictional structure" (Lacan, 2002, 306).

Taking up the determining role of the letter and its circulation, Lacan posits the subject in an intersubjective web. In the second version of his critique, Lacan adds the odds/evens game of cybernetics, to show "[t]he logic of intersubjectivity" (Marini, 1992, 161). It is here that Derrida voices concerns and attacks Lacan for taking a fiction as a truth. Derrida's problem in the reading of Lacan is his view that psychoanalysis aspires to be a universal metaphysical truth. He feels free to de-psychoanalyze Lacan and psychoanalyze Poe, for instance, when the letter circulates between three characters, the Queen, the Minister, and Dupin. In Lacan's view, the three positions construct an intersubjective triangle. This triangle is taken by Derrida to be the result of Lacan's preoccupation with the Oedipal triangle. As Gallop writes, Derrida's claim about Lacan's attachment to the Oedipal triangularity of the structure threatens "[c]onsideration of certain kinds of dyads" (Gallop, 2002, 97). Derrida states that "[i]f Dupin is double in himself, and if he is the double of a double (the narrator), etc., this threatens to introduce a certain perturbation in the delimitation of the triangles" (Ibid). Derrida ignores Lacan's theoretical concern about the intersubjectivity of desire. The letter

in the story always has significance between the characters who are interrelated to each other by intersubjectivity. The letter is important for the Queen because she is in an intersubjective relation with everyone who holds the letter. By the same token, the minister steals the letter because he is in an intersubjective bond of desire with the Queen, and finally Dupin has the letter, because he is, according to Lacan, an analyst who in his own desire remains in an intersubjective relation to the analysand, the Queen.

As we have pointed out earlier, psychoanalytic truth resides in literature as fiction in terms of a crafted object and signifier. Lacan's strategy is to discover this truth in fiction. Derrida is perfectly right when he says that Lacan gives preference to the fiction more than the truth. But he is wrong when he sees this truth as a phenomenological truth excluded from subjectivity and desire. Even what Derrida calls the truth in Lacan's criticism is relative, because the whole truth is impossible to articulate. The truth that Lacan is talking about is related to the unconscious where knowledge is erased and impossible to symbolize. The meaning of the truth that Lacan attempts to derive from "The Purloined Letter," has to be deciphered from his statement that "[t]he letter is the symbol of a pact" (Lacan, 1988b, 42). This pact is that which is signed in the unconscious. For the letter, on the one hand, transmits what Lacan calls the residue of *jouissance*, and, on the other, refuses an entry to it. This pact and its effect in a literary text constitutes the truth that always reveals itself in fiction; if it appears as it is, in its crude and unmediated form, it will be an hallucination, rupture, and an expression of the real.

Thus, the first principle of Lacanian inquiry into a literary text is to locate a psychoanalytic truth. This is the truth that makes Poe's story literature, as Lacan says, "[i]t is the truth, let us note, which makes the very existence of fiction possible" (Lacan, 1988b, 29). This is how Lacan sets out to find what makes a text literary. The truth of the letter is that it is spatial and locates the signifier in its relation to desire and the desiring subject. The tale itself reveals the discovery of the letter in the course of a dense investigation. The letter is found because, as Lacan remarks, it is always in its place and always returns to its place.

The story in question is structured around repetition in several stages of its drama and narration. In psychoanalysis repetition is caused by the insistence of the signifier in the

signifying chain that makes absence present. The repetitive re-enactment of the first scene in the tale is the first sign of repetition. The first scene, which Lacan identifies as the “primal scene,” takes place in the Queen’s boudoir. The second scene takes place in the hotel in the Minister’s room. Lacan wants to see these two scenes in terms of Freudian primary and secondary repression. The letter has been displaced in the first scene, and this displacement goes on unabated until the letter returns to the Queen. During its displacement, the letter shifts its signification as well. In the second scene, the letter is no more a love-letter; it is more a letter of intimidation. When it is found, it is no longer in the place of the Other. From then on, the letter, as Lacan argues, lacks any signification whatsoever. The second repetition of this sign lies in the intersubjective make up in each scene. The first intersubjective triangle is produced by the triadic link between the Queen, the King and the minister. Then, in the second scene, this triadic intersubjectivity is transferred to the Queen through the Prefect of Police, Dupin and the Minister. Intersubjectivity and repetition in turn stage a game of glances. There are three pairs of glances: first, the King and the police, neither of whom see anything at all; second, the Queen and the Minister, both of whom see that the King and the police don’t see; the third pair, Dupin and the Minister see that the first two glances overlook what should be hidden. At stake here again is intersubjectivity. Those who can see everything are involved in a bond of desire, and those who cannot, like the King, and the police, are excluded from this bond. Those who desire know where their signifier is located, and those who don’t, don’t know its whereabouts. Repetition is the second point Lacan wants to draw into the textual interpretation of literature. Without repetition, literature cannot sustain itself.

The letter in the tale is the locus of the signifier *par excellence*. The letter determines each subject that takes hold of it. It is the master signifier, the phallus, that a woman does not have but can be, and when the minister possesses it, it produces its feminizing effect on him, putting him in a feminine position, as Lacan emphasizes. It is important to note that Lacan sees the itinerary of the letter in Poe’s tale as a performance of the signifying chain in the symbolic. This is the chain that shows signification operating in a closed circle of difference and deferral. The constant displacement of the letter describes the law of the chain of the

signifier in the symbolic order. In this way, the signifier/letter determines each subject that takes hold of it. Here, the letter/signifier is, in fact, the master signifier or phallus.

Thus, the letter is the signifier of desire, or the phallus, which in turn becomes the signifier of each character who takes hold of the letter. This is apparent when the letter returns to the Queen (to its eternal place in a woman), and becomes virtually nothing, insofar as its signification is concerned. Therefore, the signifier and its relation to the subject is the central message of the letter. The primacy of the signifier is the third point of interest for Lacan, for the signifier provides the first encounter of the subject with language which inflicts on him a desire that alienates him from his self and language alike. This primacy reveals Lacan's insistence on the symbolic dimension of a literary text. The letter circulates among different characters without revealing its contents, for when desire emerges in the symbolic it is subject to repression.

The plot of the tale is important for Lacan and it is considered as part of the imaginary. Lacan treats the plot as a textual truth and also stresses its signification. The imaginary game that the plot represents finds meaning when it is located in the symbolic. As Lacan says, "[a] fictive tale even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity more purely to the extent that we may believe its conception arbitrary" (Lacan, 1988b, 29). Similarly Lacan is cognizant of the significance of the narration, for it is narration that changes the story into two dramas (the two scenes we pointed out earlier), and makes the action visible and the dialogue expressive. Without a narration, as Lacan says, "[t]he action would remain, properly speaking, invisible from the pit" (Ibid). Most important of all is the very word "letter," that for Lacan is not what Derrida thinks, only a postal letter. Lacan says it can be a "[t]ypographical character, epistle, or what makes a man of letters" (39). Moreover, Lacan exhaustively tries to find the etymology of "purloined," in English and French and concludes that the meaning of the title is a letter that is not stolen but a letter that is "[p]ut to the left...put amiss" (43). Lacan himself says that the letter is somehow astray, something Derrida had used as the main point of his argument. As Lacan observes: "[w]e are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has

been *prolonged* (etymologically, the word of the title), or, to revert to the language of the post office, *a letter in sufferance*” (Ibid).

In his investigation of Poe’s tale, Lacan’s attention is thus focused on four major issues: a literary text unfolds a truth, which is revealed or dramatized. This truth is, by no means, a metaphysical signified, but a truth about desire. The second issue is related to the materiality of the signifier and the locus of desire in the “defile” of the signifier. The materiality and the insistence of desire show themselves in terms of compulsive repetition in the text in many ways. The materiality and the primacy of the signifier implies the same thing. Therefore, the signifier, which represents the subject for another signifier is always “[a] series of events within language, a procession of turns, tropes and inflections” (Bowie, 1991, 76). The third issue is the signifier as the carrier of the desiring subject and as the signifier. As Poe’s tales reveals, the letter or signifier is often attached to the desire of the subject. This signifier is also the phallus. In each of its turns, the letter unfolds the desire of the subject who holds it. Meanwhile it represents the desire of the subjects who are concerned with those who possess it. This also explains Lacan’s repeated statement that desire is inter-subjective. As such, “[t]he signifier becomes a versatile topological space, a device for plotting and replotting itineraries of Lacan’s empty subject” (76). The fourth and the last issue is the significance of the structure of the plot and narrative in criticism. Lacan derives from the circulation of the letter the itinerary of the signifier. The narrative structures psychoanalytic truth in fiction and by virtue of repetition, it also shows us the three moments of the gaze in the tale.

## **2. The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein: *Desire and its Opaque Object***

Lacan published his brief review “Homage to Marguerite Duras,” on Duras’s remarkable novel *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, in 1965. The most important point in Lacan’s text is the homage, which is paid not only to Duras but to literature as a whole, because he asserts how this book shows that a writer knows psychoanalysis without psychoanalytic training. He writes, “[t]his is precisely the case in *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, where it turns out that Marguerite Duras knows without me, what I teach” (Lacan, cited in Rabaté, 2001, 116).

Lacan read Duras' novel as a testimony to desire, suffering, the object, and unknowable feminine *jouissance*. The novel, indeed, is an erotic amalgam of passionate feminine desire and its melancholic effect, like most of Duras' writings and films.

Like Poe's tale, the novel also presents a cluster of interesting characters tied up in an intersubjective bond. The novel stages a dance scene in which Lol V. Stein feels herself ravished and abandoned, when her fiancée, Michael Richardson, dances with Ann-Marie Stretter, a mysterious newcomer, an older married woman in a black dress, with whom he leaves in the morning. This dance scene is the centre of gravity of the novel and the central experience for its protagonist. She becomes obsessed with her unfulfilled desire, which she wants to fulfil with a fantasy in which she yearns for the scene to be re-enacted. However, the characters involved in this drama can re-stage it only by means of acting. Lol wants her new lover, Jacques Hold, the former lover of her school friend Tatiana Karl, a married woman, to stand for Richardson. Tatiana is asked to play the mysterious Stretter. The important part of the action of the fantasy has to be accomplished by Richardson who has to undress Stretter. It is here that Lacan links the author's symptom to her text as he did with regard to Joyce's text, which we will discuss later. He argues that there is a triadic relation at work between the author, her work and the reader, like the relation between a painter, his painting and a spectator.

Lacan, however, in this essay, criticises what he calls the "[p]edantries of a certain kind of psychoanalysis" that reduce the work of an artist to some sort of neurosis. He goes further attacking Freud for not venturing where the text invites him. He suggests that "[t]he psychologist," doesn't venture, "where the artist paves the way for him" (Lacan, 1996a, 138). Lacan reiterates here one of his key points in literary criticism which is to pay attention to those moments in the literary text that it itself calls attention to.

Lacan's interest falls on a series of repeated scopic episodes in the novel. This is mainly because the scopic field in his theory is a field in which all drives are related to the domain of desire. This triangle repeats the one formed by Richardson, Stretter, and Lol who are locked in a game structured around the gaze. This is what Lacan postulated in his theory of the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*. I will now outline some of the main issues emphasised in this essay.

Lol's fantasy begins when she wants to look at the mysterious girl with the black dress who sparks her desire like lightning. Here Lol's glance is not simply aimed at revealing the nakedness of the woman who stole her lover. She herself is also seen by that naked body, as Lacan emphasises in his theory of the gaze, that when a subject looks at the object that represents the Other, the Other in turn gazes back at the subject. The main thing for a subject in looking at an object is, in fact, her desire to be looked at. Thus, voyeurism here is an inverted exhibitionism. This captivating scopic game is what Lol is obsessed with. As Lacan puts it, "[l]et's follow Lol as she passes from one to the other, seizing from them this talisman which everyone is so eager to cast off: the gaze" (Lacan, 1996a, 139). So the field of vision is like the field of the symbolic, and the desire from which a subject arises is divided. Lacan stresses textuality in literature can be overtaken by the extra-linguistic field of vision.

Lol's desire is not locked in her voyeurism but in her demand to be the object of another gaze. This is part of her enjoyment: when she looks, she actually enjoys being looked at, for this is where her desire is located. At stake in this game is the splitting of the eye from the gaze. Lacan insists that the eyes belong to the subject whilst the gaze belongs to the Other. What Lol is lusting for is the gaze, the object of the act of looking, or the object *a*, the remnant of the Other. She finds that object outside herself in Tatiana. That object is hidden under Tatiana's hair, as Lacan quotes the phrase from the novel, "[n]aked, naked under her black hair" (Lacan, 1996a, 140). Tatiana's beauty, for Lacan, is a function, but not the usual function where by lovers entraps each other. The function in question here is the object or the gaze, as Lacan says in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, "[T]he object *a* in the field of the visible is the gaze" (Lacan, 1979a, 105). Jacques Hold gives Lol a position in the fantasy where she could have access to that object which is located within Tatiana's beauty. Lol is attracted and fixated by the first episode of dance, where she was left in the lurch by her fiancé. This scopic interaction of an image and a subject is precisely what is posited by Lacan when he is writing on *Antigone*. It is a zone which not only attracts, but is also capable of capturing the subject. In short, the whole novel, according to Lacan, is the game of the gaze in which the subject remains as the non-gaze, or an object gazed at: "[y]ou can verify it, this gaze is everywhere in the novel. And the woman of the event is easy to recognise, since Marguerite Duras has depicted her as a non-gaze" (Lacan, cited in Rabaté, 2001, 126).

At the end of his essay, Lacan cites sublimation and its importance for literary creativity. Following Freud, he states that Duras, like any other writer, produces the object *a* or the gaze by his/her art. This is so that sublimation can offer the satisfaction of desire despite repression. Lacan here emphasizes desire and its satisfaction which are always at play in literature at any level. What is the source of this satisfaction? Lacan's answer is that artistic production is the production of objects and this object is an object *a*, a remnant of the Other, like the gaze. The artist as subject and his gaze are what are at stake in a painting. As he says, "[I]n work, it is as subject, as gaze, that the artist intends to impose on us" (Lacan, 1979a, 100).

Lacan concludes that the gaze belongs to the locus of the Other, and its starting point, what Lacan calls the life of the subject, remains between two deaths, one where he enters into the symbolic and the other, literal physical death. With this, Lacan arrives at a crucial point where it can be said of Duras' characters that they are all "gravitating" around the locus of the Other. In Duras' text, the re-enactment of the primary separation takes place but usually within a scopic field. This is the place around which the eyes of a voyeur or the feet of a dancer circle. Lacan saw in Duras' novel an historical evolution of the novel that replaced courtly love with "[a] mere fictional account, and then to cover up the losses incurred—losses parried by the convention of courtly love—as it developed into the novel of marital promiscuity" (Lacan, cited in Rabaté, 2001, 128). Indeed by intermingling desire and literature in the above review essay, Lacan, as Bowie says is "[s]ummoning psychoanalysis and literature to a shared apotheosis" (Bowie, 1987, 143).

### **3. *Antigone*: A Mirror of Literary Lacan**

Lacan's seminar on *Antigone* in *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis* is one of his most splendid texts and shows his passion for literature as well as the depth of his critical insight. In this text, Lacan explores the function of tragedy in the Western literary tradition. He starts by criticizing Hegel's emphasis on the opposition between family values and the politics of the state, as represented by Antigone and Creon as the focal concern of the play. Then he looks at the function of the chorus in classical Greek drama as a tool for passing critical judgements on the play. He also points to Goethe's response to the play, which followed Antigone's speech with awe when she says that her brother is dearer to her than her husband and children.

This inconvenience in the behavior of the heroine was seen as a transgression in the characterisation of Antigone. Goethe expresses his doubt, according to Lacan, in his statement “[t]hat one day some scholar will reveal to us that this [speech by Antigone] is a later addition” (Lacan, 1992, 255).

Lacan connects *Antigone* to the core of human subjectivity, which starts its development with primordial trauma and tragedy. To Lacan, like Aristotle, tragedy was a *posteriori*, the re-enactment of something already experienced, and he leads us to that original experience. Thus, tragedy for Lacan was an expression of the aim of desire. Lacan offers here another dimension to his critique of art and literature, the role of catharsis. As he says, “[I] want to emphasize that element in modern literature which has given rise to the use of the term catharsis in the medical sense” (Lacan, 1992, 24). Antigone’s desire is a pure desire because Lacan identified it as the desire for death: “[s]he pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire” (282). This desire for death—as Antigone herself says, “I am dead and I desire death” (81)—is, in fact, a desire for the Other (282). We may sum up the Lacanian approach to tragedy as follows:

Lacan is interested to relate Sophocles’ play structurally to the desire between an analyst and an analysand, for here, we encounter a coalescence of opposing desires, that of Antigone and the tyrant Creon. Political principle is where Creon’s desire resides, and Antigone’s desire is beyond individual will. It is a desire for death. In order to fulfil her desire, she buries her brother Polynices, an act forbidden by the law, and she is conscious of the consequences, which are that she will be buried alive in return for her “crime.” Lacan connects Antigone’s crime with the point of the Oedipal drama in the play. The offspring of a “criminal desire,” the brothers and sisters in Sophocles’ tragedy act where power and crime are in conflict. Lacan is keen to unravel the tie that was knotted by Oedipus, by seeing Antigone as placed between two deaths. It means that the Oedipus complex opens a path for a subject a path that begins and ends with death. As we explained above, the first death is entry into the symbolic and the next, natural death. Lacan concludes that Oedipal crime in the play is displayed in the opposition between two brothers, one representing power, and Polynices, representing crime.

Lacan focuses on the enigmatic word *Aīē*, the translation of a Greek word that repeatedly appears in *Antigone*. It is important to spell this out, for, according to Lacan, “Family *Aīē*...is the theme or true axis on which the whole tragedy turns” (Lacan, 1992, 283). What does Lacan mean by this word? Lacan interprets *Aīē*” in the play as the mother’s desire, the core of a subject’s desire, and according to him, “Antigone perpetuates, eternalizes, immortalizes that *Aīē* (283). What blinds Antigone is her faithfulness to the desire of the mother. In this dangerous path she defends her action, the unlawful burial of her brother Polynices. Lacan locates this *Aīē* in the field of the Other which makes Antigone an exemplary subject of human desire in literature.

Echoing the Aristotelian principle of the arts, especially music, Lacan sees in *Antigone* a “ritual function,” that of “catharsis,” a passionate emotional discharge or “[c]eremonial sense of purification at work” (Lacan, 1992, 245). Besides this, *Antigone* re-enacts a crisis of catharsis, or as Lacan calls it a “Dionysian frenzy” caused by a conflict between two desires in the play. Part of the emotional reaction to the drama is played out by the chorus. The chorus is very important in the play for it functions as a comment, emotional reaction, and to some degree, the interpretation of the action. This confirms Lacan’s point that there is an interpretative act in both psychoanalysis and literature.

Again in the Aristotelian sense, Lacan sees a deep sense of “pity and fear” in *Antigone*. While her determination and her beauty, purity and innocence attract us, Antigone’s faith and death and also the tyrannical aspect of the law incite fear in us “[S]he has a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us” (Lacan, 1992, 247). Lacan ascribes this sense of fear and pity to the reaction of a subject to the imaginary order. This is the order that reveals itself in the symbolic in different guises. However, when it comes to the characters there is one who doesn’t have any fear and pity, and that according to Lacan is Antigone. Creon, in contrast, is in a state of fear. For Lacan, *Antigone* is another face of the Oedipal drama in which the desire of the mother is re-enacted.

The last important point for the interpretation of a literary text is the effect produced by art and literature. Beauty both sparks and somehow halts desire. In *Antigone*, Lacan sees the effect of beauty on desire. It is in the zone of beauty that desire is “reflected” and

“refracted”, as Lacan argues, “It is when passing through that zone that the beam of desire is both reflected and refracted till it ends up giving us the most strange and most profound of effects, which is the effect of beauty on desire” (Lacan, 1992, 248). Lacan shows his passion for literature by a very close reading of *Antigone*. He criticizes the flawed translations of this text, “[S]ophocles is no pedantic schoolmaster, but unfortunately he has been translated by pedants” (Lacan, 1992, 269). Lacan’s focal point in his critique is a pure desire, which is a desire for the death of the desiring subject. This desire, in addition, confirms the status of desire as the Other’s desire. Lacan affirms the Aristotelian sense of *catharsis* at work in art. Thus, this play stages a drama that offers a real sense of *catharsis*, and beauty in art.

#### **4. Gide and Desire:**

Lacan in his essay “The Youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire” written in 1958 surprisingly returns to Freudian psychobiography himself after violently attacking the methodology. Lacan addresses the question of the pervert psychic structure. The complexity of Gide’s case also helps Lacan clarify the name of the father function. Lacan was not interested in objectifying Gide, but rather using his case as a way to advance certain ideas in psychoanalysis. By examining Gide’s letters and events in his troubled childhood and early adulthood, Lacan suggested that Gide was suffering from the split of the ego that cause him to develop a weak ego. The entry to the symbolic or the speech that humanizes desire was lacking in Gide. This was the reason that desire for Gide was limited to the clandestine. He refers to Gide’s wife who burned many of Gide’s letters which she herself says were her most precious possessions. They were his love letters, a correspondence that spanned many years, beginning with their first meeting. He also said the letters was his most prized possession, the most beautiful correspondence of his life, and the child he never had.

At the end, I have to emphasise that Lacanian theories like other post-structuralist thinkers does not lend themselves to be articulated in a conventional coherent system of discourse. They look more like fragments of a picture in a broken glass. It is largely because in theory everything is inconsistent and subject to multiple meanings.  
Thank you for listening.

To conclude our discussion of this chapter, Lacan's reception abroad as a literary theorist more than a psychoanalyst is not surprising. With its deep literary relevance, each word in his theory is related directly or indirectly to language and its formative and extra-textual effect on human subjectivity. His earlier emphasis on the signifier as the carrier of human subjectivity, and his later refocusing on writing as a way of playing with the real and the unconscious—as Poe and Joyce bear witness—find their basis in literature. For him the poetic and referential functions of language are inseparable from desire and the symptom. His reading and critique of scores of literary texts bring the structure and aesthetic of literature and his psychoanalytic epistemology together. His theorisation is based on the correlation between psychoanalytic clinical practice and literary creation. Furthermore, his thinking about literature and art is not grounded in the Freudian emphasis upon psychobiography and the instinctual unconscious. On the contrary, as a signifying process, art and literature are closely connected to the materials that psychoanalysis is based on.

The theory of literature that Lacan developed during different periods of his teachings refocused attention on textual reading. In his earlier teaching, the critique of canonical literature emphasised desire, and in his final period, focus shifted to literature as writing of the real and of the symptom of the author. Text itself opened a scene for him, a scene that showed him the object that he would love and write about, as Barthes writes in reference to Lacan in *Lover's Discourse*, “[w]hat is immediate stands for what is fulfilled: I am initiated: the scene consecrates the object I am going to love” (Barthes, 1993b, 437).

As we have shown in the second section of this chapter, it is difficult to summarise different strands in Lacanian literary criticism in a single methodology. The various approaches we have elaborated here are related to the intrinsic properties and plenitude of messages in a literary text. Lacan's seminar on Poe's short story reveals his approach to literature, in which he adds a structural account of his clinical practice to fiction. In *Antigone* as in Shakespeare's plays, he sees his own theory of desire in action. In Duras desire comes into play in the visual field. Lacan's seminar on Joyce clearly manifests the superiority of his critical model over Derrida's deconstructive literary criticism. For when it comes to Joyce, Derrida's deconstruction loses interpretive distance and identifies with his text, as he himself admitted

in the Ninth Joyce Symposium when he calls deconstruction, “[a] post-Joycean form of writing (Derrida, cited in Leonard, 1993, 8-9).

As we have argued above, the spirit of multi-disciplinarity in Lacan’s critique of literature makes his heritage an inspiration for future poststructuralist critical ventures into arts and literature. In the coming pages, our knowledge of Lacan’s psychoanalytic and literary theories will empower us to see the literature of desire in Shakespeare, literature of love and *jouissance* in John Donne’s poetics, and the literature of the *sinthome* in Joyce and

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It then deals with Lacan’s theory of literary creation, poetics, and literariness, before turning to the principal tenets of Lacan’s literary criticism as well as his adoption of new critical paradigms.