Bakhtin, *From Rabelais and his World (On Carnival)*

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1.0 Objectives:

After completing this unit you will be able to achieve the following objectives. This unit will help you to:

● Provide a brief account of the life and works of Mikhail Mikhailovic Bakhtin

● Understand the relevance of *Rabelais and his world* within its literary and political context

● Explain Bakhtin’s idea of Carnival, its relation with grotesque as well as the different viewpoints held by Bakhtin and Fraser in relation to theory of grotesque.

1.1 Introduction:

In this unit we shall examine the work of another prominent postmodern theorist, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. Based on his famous work *Rabelais and His World* (1984), this unit shall specifically discuss his idea of the carnivalesque. As you will see, Bakhtin proposes his idea of carnivalesque as anarchic and liberating moments in which the world is turned upside down and thereby inverts the social, political and legal hierarchies of the world temporarily. It is also important to stress that carnival in Bakhtin’s work is both a description of historical phenomena as well as certain literary tradition referred to as carnivalesque i.e. when the spirit of carnival pervades any work of literature it promotes the carnivalesque. While discussing the idea of carnival Bakhtin also highlights the relation between grotesque and the spirit of Carnival as witnessed in the medieval and renaissance grotesque. The renaissance and medieval grotesque are filled with the spirit of the carnival that liberates the world from all its gloominess and
darkness and therefore the grotesque is an integral part of the culture of the folk humor and the carnival spirit. The discussion that follows will help us achieve a more detailed understanding of the idea of carnival as proposed by Bakhtin.

1.2 Life and works of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin:

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a prominent theorist of discourse in the twentieth century. He was a Russian philosopher, literary critic and semiotician who was re-discovered by the Russian scholars only in the 1960s. Working under the shadow of Stalinism, issues of political resistance was one of the important traits of his work. He was refused his doctorate because of the controversial nature of his work on Rabelais, and subsequently sentenced to internal exile in Kazakhstan during Stalin’s purges. When alive much of what he wrote was initially shrouded in controversy. Bakhtin was re-discovered when some students at Gorky Institute came across his book on Dostoevsky entitled Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics (1984) and his dissertation on Rabelais that they found in the archives. His dissertation on Rabelais was published in 1965 and thus his famous work Rabelais and His World (1968) is actually his once rejected doctoral dissertation.

In his first major work Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin developed some of the concepts which were to inform much of his works. His concept of ‘Polyphony’ meaning multiple voices is central to this analysis. He considers Dostoevsky’s work as a site of different voices unmerged into a single perspective and also not subordinates to the voice of the author. The multiple voices have their own perspectives, their own validity as well as its own narrative weight in the novel. Here, he also introduced the concept of dialogism. Dialogism does not simply mean different perspectives on the same world but also involves the distribution of utterly
incompatible elements within different perspectives on the same world. In his *The Dialogical Imagination*, Bakhtin extends his analysis of dialogism through the concept of Heteroglossia. Another important work by Bakhtin is *Rabelais and his world*, which shall be examined in the next section of the unit.

Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* published in 1968, traces the history of grotesque in European culture and literature by focusing in Rabelais’ writings. Francois Rabelais (1494-1553) was a writer of fantasy, satire, the grotesque, bawdy jokes and songs. Rabelais interests Bakhtin because his work casts a retrospective light on the folk culture of humor and at the same time his novel is an immense tragedy of folk humor. Moreover by dealing with the work of Rabelais, Bakhtin also tries to highlight the positive aspects of the art of grotesque. To highlight how the grotesque proposes an alternative way of becoming in which the spirit of carnival have an important role to play.

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin propounded his widely cited concept of the carnivalesque in different works of literature. This literary mode shares a close alliance with the disregarding of authority and inversion of social hierarchies that are permitted in many cultures during the season of carnival. This particular mode of presentation finds its way in different works of literature by introducing diverse voices from social levels that freely mock and subverts authority, flout social norms by ribaldry and exhibit various ways of profaning what is regarded as sacrosanct. It is the carnival’s power to overthrow, though temporarily, the rigid social hierarchies that attracts Bakhtin to the carnival form. And according to him, to explain this there can be no better writer then Rabelais because he claims that in Rabelais it is for the last time one sees the possibility of incorporating into literature the collective chthonian impulse to carnival (Bakhtin,xii).
1.3 Bakhtin’s idea of Carnival:

Bakhtin’s theory of carnival as it is developed in his seminal work *Rabelais and his World* has impacted on a variety of disciplines. Although the concept is completely literary, he claims a historical underpinning to it by tracing the occurrence of the carnivalesque in ancient, medieval and renaissance writers. Carnival embodies a popular folk based culture whose defining feature is its irrelevant antipathy to the official and hierarchical structure of everyday life. Carnival is an assertion of freedom where all people participated to bring about a temporary liberation from the established order of life. The inherent feature of carnival that attracts Bakhtin is its emphatic and purposeful “heteroglossia” as well as its multiplicity of styles.

Carnival was often performed in the public sphere like the street, alleys, market place, town squares etc. When talked about carnival as a performance, one should not confuse carnival with theatrical performances. Carnival does not know footlights and at the same time it is a participatory form of pageantry that saw no distinction between the actors and the spectators. People did not see or enjoy carnival rather they lived in it. During carnival time the only law that governed the people was the law of freedom and thereby there was no life outside it. To quote Bakhtin, Carnival

… has a universal spirit ; it is a special condition of the entire world ,of the world’s revival and renewal in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.

One important characteristics of carnival is the role reversal where the public dressed up as kings and clergy and behaved like wise. All that was considered to be holy and held in high regard was debashed with ridicule without any real life repercussions. This alternative way of
living through the act of play and laughter placed every individual on the same plane. Bakhtin characterizes carnival as ‘the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter’ (Bakhtin, 8), insisting that the laughter which gave form to carnival rituals freed them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism. The main highlight of the carnival is that it is universal in scope and is directed to everyone including those who participated in the carnival. Carnival laughter is ambivalent because it is gay and triumphant and at the same time mocking and deriding. Distinct from other utopianism, Carnival is not based on abstract thoughts and hypothesis rather it’s a physical utopian experiment which was enacted and performed both in body and mind. It is a medium to express collective frustration against the world. The utopian world that they create during the carnival is sensuous and bodily rather than intellectual. It temporarily reorganizes societal constructs through performances.

Bakhtin claims that in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. Bakhtin states that in the middle ages carnival played an important role in the lives of ordinary people. These people had a double sphere of life: the official and the unofficial. The first sphere was governed by the church and the feudal state and the second, was characterized by laughter, parody, songs and reversal of the official system. For him, the clown, the fool and comic rites subvert the official sphere dominated by the church and the state. During the renaissance, carnival played an important role in the lives of all class of people. They devoted about three months of a year to such festivities. In renaissance carnival, they celebrated the freedom that came from inversions in social hierarchies, suspensions of sexual restraints and the possibility of playing new and different roles.
Though carnival and carnivalesque have the same root, they mean two different yet related things. Carnival usually refers to an established period in time where specific cultures engage themselves in a celebration of the world where the commonly held values of the world or the cultural milieu are reversed. Similarly, when this type of spirit is seen in any work of literature where they assail the unassailable, take fiction as truth or make magical the real truth by blurring the distinction between the two, it is then the work promoted the carnivalesque. Carnivalesque as a literary mode parallels the flouting of authority and temporary inversion of social hierarchies that, in many cultures, are permitted during the season of carnival. These subversive and parody traits are most prominently found in the works of Rabelais and Dostoevsky.

### 1.4 Carnival and the Grotesque

Bakhtin points out that the grotesque sees its origins from the culture of folk humour and the carnival spirit. The exaggeration of the body to be grotesque is also related to the carnivalesque. There are comic figures/performers, such as clowns, that contribute to the grotesque image. And thus he recapitulates his views on the grotesque as follows:

> Actually the grotesque liberates man from all the forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world. This concept is uncrowned by the grotesque and reduced to the relative and limited. [...] The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretence of an extra temporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new possibilities. (Rabelais and His World 49)

According to Bakhtin, in Rabelais’ work the material bodily principle i.e. the images of the human body with its “food, drink, defection, and sexual life” (Bakhtin,) in its exaggerated form
plays a predominant role. For Bakhtin, this images are nothing but modified heritage of the culture of the folk humour. Bakhtin terms this as ‘grotesque realism’ where the “cosmic, social and bodily” elements are given an indivisible whole.

One essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation. Degradation is the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract and thereby transferring it to a material level, to the sphere of earth and body. The concept of “upward” and “downward” are limited to topographical meaning where “downward” is earth, and “upward” is heaven. Degradation has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. For instance, Earth is not only an element that devours, swallows up (grave, the womb) but at the same time it is also an element of birth, of renascence. In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive:

It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots, of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthly, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (Bakhtin, 19)

The grotesque image in contrast to the classic image of the finished man, reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an unfinished man always in “growth and becoming”. And this makes
ambivalence another indispensable trait of grotesque realism. For him, grotesque is always a representation of unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, of growth and becoming; It is frightening and humorous all at the same time. A more detailed understanding of Bakhtin’s concept of grotesque and carnival will be carried in the next section of the unit where he refutes the theory of grotesque propounded by the German theorist, Wolfgang Kayser.

1.4.1 Bakhtin and Kayser’s theory of the grotesque

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the grotesque has lost all its medieval and renaissance characteristics and considered as a vulgar comic genre or as a peculiar form of satire that was directed towards isolated and purely negative objects. This understanding of the grotesque is highly visible in G. Schneegan’s book entitled *The History of Grotesque Satire* (1894) where he defines satirical grotesque as “always negative… the exaggeration of the abnormal, an exaggeration that is incredible and therefore becomes fantastic” (Bakhtin, 45). Here Schneegan fails to grasp the positive hyperbolism of the material bodily principle; the positive regenerating power of laughter. He sees merely “the negative, rhetorical satire of the nineteenth century, a laughter that does not laugh” (45, Bakhtin). His purely satirical interpretation of the grotesque is typical of the literary approach of the second part of the nineteenth century as well as of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Rabelais traces some basic characteristics of the modern grotesque image by dealing with German literary critic Wolfgang Kayser’s work *The Grotesque in Painting and Poetry* (1957) which he considers to be the “first and the only serious work on the theory of the grotesque” (Bakhtin, 46). While dealing with the theory of the grotesque he does not discuss the integral relation between grotesque and carnival and instead grounds his theory on the concept of
existentialism. To this, Bakhtin states that the true nature of the grotesque cannot be separated from the culture of folk humour and carnival spirit.

Kayser defines grotesque as being gloomy and terrifying. This association of gloominess with the grotesque, according to Bakhtin, is an alien concept because the medieval and renaissance grotesque filled with the spirit of grotesque liberated the world from all that is dark and terrifying. Grotesque takes away all the fear and therefore is completely gay and bright. Fear is the extreme expression of narrow minded and stupid seriousness which is defeated by laughter” (Bakhtin, 47). Kayser further identifies hostility, alienation, inhumaness to be essential trait of the grotesque. Stressing particularly on the element of alienation he claims that the grotesque is an alienated world where all that is friendly and familiar becomes hostile. In short terms, the world undergoes a change. In this context Bakhtin points out that alienation discloses the potentiality of different world, of another order and another way of life” (Bakhtin, 48) which liberates man from the confinements of the of the apparent false unities that exist in the world; it liberates from the undisputable and the stable. Sustaining to its root culture of folk humor, the world turns into an alienated one to be destroyed and then to be regenerated and renewed. Here it also becomes important to note is that the new world is experienced by people both in thought and body. The bodily participation/awareness of the alternate world is of immense importance in the grotesque.

For Kayser, grotesque is only an art form that expresses the id. He does not use the term in a Freudian sense but that defines it as the alien power that governs the world, men, their life and their behavior. For him, the theme of madness used in the grotesque indicate the presence of some alien, inhuman spirit in the mad man. But Bakhtin defies the interpretation stating that the theme of madness in grotesque is used to escape the ‘false truth’ of the world so that one can
view the world with eyes free of this ‘false truth’. Grotesque is involved in liberating man from all its ‘inhuman consciousness’ therefore it cannot limit itself by the alien power of the id. Rather the grotesque which is guided by the principle of laughter and the carnival spirit “frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities(Bakhtin,49); it is guided by the carnival consciousness and thereby the “id” is ‘uncrowned’ and transformed into a ‘funny monster’. The abstract is brought down to the physical world.

According to Kayser, grotesque “expresses not the fear of death but the fear of life”(Bakhtin, 49-50). Bakhtin defies this statement by claiming that grotesque imagery never represents death as a negation of life but part of life as a whole. Death in grotesque is indispensable component of life, the condition of life’s constant renewal and rejuvenation. On Fraser’s idea of grotesque laughter, he formulates it as “laughter combined with bitterness which takes the grotesque form acquires the trait of mockery, cynicism and finally becomes satanic. He looks at the laughter as a negative element. To this Bakhtin adds that Kayser completely misses the gay, liberating and generating element of grotesque laughter.

From the above discussions, we see that by discussing Kayser’s theory of the grotesque Bakhtin makes it clear that the grotesque can never be separated from the idea of carnival. For him, the grotesque in modern traditions has lost the true aesthetic nature because of its deviation from medieval folk culture. The depth, variety, and power of separate grotesque themes can be understood only by its relation to the unity of folk and carnival spirit. As Baktin makes it clear that “if examined outside of this unit, they become one sided, flat and stripped of their rich content’(Bakhtin,51-52).
Check Your Progress

1. State whether True or False:

   a. Carnival is a sum total of different festivities and rituals that involve the subversion of the established order of life.
   b. Carnival is a permanent state of life.
   c. Grotesque is an inseparable part of the folk humour and the carnival spirit.
   d. Kayser considers grotesque laughter to be filled with cynicism and mockery.
   e. Bakhtin and Kayser share the same idea on the theory of grotesque.
   f. For Bakhtin, grotesque is the form of expressing the id.

2. In which book does Mikhail Bakhtin introduce his concept of Carnival?

3. What do you mean by ‘carnivalesque’?

4. Name the nineteenth century writer who wrote the book The History of Grotesque Satire.

5. Name the book written by Wolfgang Kayser that discusses his theory of the grotesque.

6. Fill in the blanks:

   a. Bakhtin considers carnival as a ---------- and-------- that stood beyond the official dom.
   b. Carnival was a ______________ form of pageantry that saw no distinction between __________ and __________
   c. Carnival is based on _________ utopian experiment.
   d. In renaissance carnival, they celebrated the freedom that came from inversions in __________, __________ and __________.
   e. _______ is one important feature of carnival laughter.
   f. The true nature of the grotesque cannot be separated from the culture of __________ and __________.
   g. According to Kayser, the grotesque world is an ______________.
   h. Fear is the extreme expression of ___________ and ___________ which is defeated by __________.
   i. Grotesque imagery does not represent death as a __________ but part of life as a __________.
   j. The unity of ________ and___________ is important to understand the theme of grotesque.
1.5 Let us sum up:

In this unit, we familiarized ourselves with Mikahil Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and its relation with the grotesque. He describes carnival as an anarchic and liberating period in time where the social, political and legal hierarchies are inverted temporarily. It is a universal phenomenon that included each and everyone who participated in it. Similarly, carnivalesque is the literary mode or practice in which diverse voices from different social levels freely mock and subvert authority, flout social norms by ribaldry and also exhibit various ways of profaning what is regarded as sacrosanct. Moreover, Bakhtin also establishes how it is important to link grotesque with the folk humour and the spirit of carnival to understand the actual nature of the different themes used in the grotesque. Thus, he makes it clear that the grotesque is inseparable from carnival culture and at the same time is more than any vulgar comic genre.

1.6 Key Words:

**Heteroglossia**: It is a Bakhtinian term which means the simultaneity of many levels of dialogues and languages. For Bakhtin, novels are the prime examples of what he calls heteroglossia. In the case of novel, the different voices from different social levels are given equal importance, thereby showing as the site of struggle, carnival and subversion.

**Grotesque**: Grotesque is used to describe different artistic forms that combined incongruous elements. In the recent time it is used to refer to anything unnatural, strange, absurd, ludicrous, distorted, wildly fantastic, or bizarre. It has often been identified as a sign of decadence.

**Existentialism**: It is a philosophy which views human being as a isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe. It conceives the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning and represents human life as a fruitless venture for purpose and significance. It begins
its search from nothingness to nothingness and thereby the existence is both anguished and absurd.

**Utopia:** Utopia designates a class of fictional writing that represents an ideal, nonexistent political and social way of life. It is derived from *Utopia* (1515-1516), a book written by the Renaissance humanist Sir Thomas More which describes a perfect commonwealth. The utopian world is generally superior to the present world or manifest exaggerated versions of some of its unsavory aspects, serve primarily as vehicles for satire on contemporary world and human life.

1.7 Suggested Readings:

Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*

Terry Eagleton’s *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* and *Literary Theory: An Introduction*

Ann B. Dobie’s *Theory and Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*

Pramod K Nayar’s *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism.*
### Possible Answers to CYP Questions

1. a. True b. false c. True  d. True. e. False. f. False

2. *Rabelais and His World*

3. carnivalesque is the literary mode or practice in which diverse voices from different social levels freely mock and subvert authority, flout social norms by ribaldry and also exhibit various ways of profaning what is regarded as sacrosanct.

4. G. Schneegan


6. a). Second world, second life.  b) Participatory, actor, spectator. c) Physical. d) Social Hierarchy, suspension of sexual restraint, possibility of playing new and different roles. e) Ambivalent. f) folk humour, carnival spirit. g) alienated world. h) narrow mindedness, stupid seriousness, laughter. i) negation of life, whole. j) folk, carnival spirit.
1.9 References:


1.11 Model Questions:

1. Explain the idea of Carnival as propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin.

2. Do you think that Carnival is a universal phenomenon? If yes/no give reasons.

3. What link does Bakhtin draw between carnival and the grotesque?

4. Show the different points of similarity and differences between Kayser and Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque. Does Bakhtin agree with Kayser’s understanding of the grotesque?
Foucault, “What is an Author?”

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 The evolution of Author as a concept

1.3 The properties of an “author-function” and its working through various discourses

1.4 The function of the "return to the origin" concept

Check Your Progress

1.5 Let us sum up

1.6 Keywords

1.7 Suggested Readings

Possible Answers to CYP

References

Model Questions
1.0 Objectives:

After reading this unit, you will be able to achieve the following objectives. This unit will help you to

- Explain the function of an author as developed by Foucault.
- Identify the change of the relationship between author and his work.
- Analyse how the function of an author works.
- Describe the changes and developments that can be seen through the roles that an author with and without his works have played.

1.1 Introduction

“What is an Author?” by Michel Foucault is originally a lecture on literary theory given at the College de France on 22nd February 1969 by the French philosopher. The essay directly concerns the relationship between author, text, and the reader and is mostly a response to an essay written by Barthes. The essay “The Death of the Author” was written in 1967 essay by the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes. Here he argues the traditional notion of literary criticism where it is emphasized that the interpretation of a text should be free from any form of biographical context of the writers. Owing to the characteristic figure of an an author Foucault in his essay makes several arguments as to what kind of characteristics are needed to establish an
individual as an ‘author’. This text tries to find the function of an author and his role to form an idea without him being subjected to define his work through the lens of an established author but rather according to Foucault his work should independently determinative of the knowledge that he wanted to procure rather than his position as an author. The text thereby renders the idea of free flowing of thoughts. Foucault defines the function of the author and the concept of the author throughout the different times of past, present and future. The essay challenges the authoritative function of an author and the interpretation of the work was based or given to be interpreted by the readers.

(Paul-Michel Foucault is one of the most important figures in critical theory. He was born on 15th October, 1926 in Poitiers, France and was educated at the Lycee Henri-IV, at the Ecole Normale Superieure where he developed an interest in philosophy. He was a major figure in developing the theories of Post-Structuralism, Postmodernism, etc.)

1.2 The evolution of Author as a concept

In the beginning of the essay, Foucault raises the question of the general functions of an author within any discourse and speaks of the ways, in which an author has been used by him in terms of the ‘rules’ or the principles in order to present the idea that he wanted to create by any respective author’s work. He have used various other ‘discursive’ layers in his book *The Order of Things* when he used the terms of “natural history”, “analysis of wealth” and “political economy” in its most general form. But the use of authors like Buffon, Cuvier, Ricardo was primarily through an ambiguous understanding of the ideas as it wit was understood that those writers’ thoughts and ideas would cohere with Foucault’s representation of thoughts. Foucault well understands the creation of confusion when he uses the names of the writers like Buffon or
Marx as both of them are diversely different writers when it comes to understanding them through a personal viewpoint. But Foucault, states that by using the names of the writers, he wanted to bring into focus certain ‘concepts’ and ‘theoretical relationship’ that may interrelate to their work. He further talks of the allegations being made about his using of names like Linneaus and Buffon and further by placing Cuvier next to Darwin as it prescribes to make them belong to a ‘monstrous family’.

By not escaping such names of discursive practices like “natural history” or “political economy” he is trying to delimit the functions that may unite these varied ideas together to understand it more in a wider sense, but however he does realize that one cannot overlook the demand of a direct response about the author when it is Knowledge and literature or Theory of a concept, any literary genre or even a branch of Philosophy and the more concerned fact always remains about the author and his related works. Such an observation of a forcible related similarity between author and his work has been started since the days of portraying the ‘visuality’ of a character; that is the supposed hero in a story. In its most basic form, it is treated that the characteristic of a hero must match up to the biography of the author who writes the story, thereby forming a critical category called “the man and his work”. But Foucault’s attempt through his work give rise to the ways as to how, an author can be seen through the many perspectives of as an authority that can be individualized through the work that he writes and he finds a problem with such a development.

Foucault wanted to focus on the fact which dealt with the author’s relationship with the text in a way which doesn’t bind him only to the text but is able to produce an idea beyond the text. In this sense Foucault wanted to explain how writing cannot be the vehicle to be used by the writer to convey his feelings to the reader rather, writing should be the flow of language without the
idea of what and where the author stands in with regard to the idea that he is conveying. In this context, Foucault quotes Samuel Beckett, who in his book, *Texts for Nothing*, writes about the important functions of an author.

*What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking.*

Foucault sees this line as an expression of some of the major principles of contemporary writing. Such writing represents the factuality of interplaying of signifiers, or on discussion which places more importance on the "acoustic" quality of the signifier that addresses its own self-references and about the language itself. Today's world of writing have become more self-explanatory and it has stopped over emphasizing of meaning to be expressed but what is more expressed is the meaning that is produced and brought out through the "exterior deployment" of the words. The usage of more signs to deploy the meanings has been in use and in due course of time, the traditional form of writing have transgressed and transformed to find and associate a new way of writing. Foucault’s purpose of the essay was also to deviate and from any emotions related to the act of writing or the emphasis put on to represent a certain language rather his sole purpose was to discuss a space where the act of writing frees itself from the incorporation of any direct subject. Foucault goes on to discuss about the preconceived notions of knowing the interrelationship of writing and death that has been followed throughout the various genres of writing. But such a way of writing has drastically changed because of the appearance of the ways that certain modern writers follow. Before, while representing the interrelationship of death and writing, the writers like in the Greek narratives transcends the role of a ‘hero’ when he accepts an early death thus making his life valorized more by accepting an early death and in this way, death compensates of all his flaws. Taking further, on the theme of death and its representation in writings, Foucault talks of the characters like in *Arabian Nights*, where the narrator in the
story keep on telling stories to avoid the imminent death. But such a stratagem has been stopped to be used for the modern writers like Franz Kafka, Flaubert, Proust. These writers have defined death in a more personalized way because at present times of writing the death of any character in the story or of the writer becomes a unique characteristic of their individuality. Writing at present times does not require the representation of the writer himself rather it is the absence of him that makes the writer clearer of his thoughts. Writing now is concentrated of killing the self and the writers now are ready to be sacrificed or not appear at all throughout the narrative.

They represent life in its totality and such sacrifices happen in the life of the author and the characters on daily basis. For Foucault, in order to understand the true relationship of death and writing, it is only possible by eliminating completely the true characteristics of the Individual as a writer which is meant to provide the understanding of the conceptions without necessarily assembling one's own character to it. The disappearance of the author from his own writing has become the singular way to know about his individuality. The modern writers like them have opted to transverse the concept of death in their writing and Foucault speaks of the reinvention of the concept of death. Such a change of privileged emphasis from the position of the author has change the way of the writing. According to Foucault the task of the criticism while determining the task of the author and its relation with the author shouldn't be about reestablishing author's work to himself or to reconstitute author's experiences to be reflective in his work but it must concern with the structure of the work by the author and to have a clearly defined structure of the work that is discussed for its internal function working for to elucidate a certain meaning.

Foucault now shifts his discussion to understanding the concept of “work”. What may be in general called as work? He questions the validity of a work which is not written by someone who is understood to be an “author” and is a mere individual. For instance what category of work
does Marquis De Sade’s paper of works fall in before he established himself as an author? Such a question has been raised because the book that he wrote named *Letters from Prison* was during his days in prison. He further questions that if an individual has not established himself as an author; will his work be of any relevance or as such when a work can be entitled as "work". Along with the doubtful invocation of whether to call an individual author or not, Foucault calls in for an assumption that even if an individual is assumed to be an author, which of his work should be treated of as important and of relevance. For example: Friedrich Nietzsche is one of those writers who have written a large number of works, but the question arises among all of the works that he has written which are the ones that should be published and given the status of "work" after his death. This is a question that is in need of a required framework because after Nietzsche’s death is it possible to publish all his works which are still merely in the form of drafts and the notes which may include certain ‘aphorisms’. For example there might be many reminders of many trivial things like an appointment, a laundry or an electricity bill. Such unclear thoughts for Foucault should be properly guided in through an established framework. Here, the question lies in the fact that which references in the life of a writer can be taken for inspiration to be claimed as work. Questioning the relevance to what can be called as a work, Foucault underscores the various problems that arises due to the ownership of an individual's work. He cites example of the works like *The Arabian Nights, Stromata’s Clement of Alexandria* and *The Lives of Diogenes Laertes* where the primary sources of the books have not been established but still is popularly well-known in as critical works. So, even though at some points, many works have been appreciated without the author being a prominent figure but the problematic nature of the rules that unites and signifies a work is problematic. Foucault then goes
on to explain about the detention of the certain thesis that detains him from using the measure of author's disappearance is the concept of *écriture*.

‘Écriture’ is the French word for Writing or refers to one or more specific senses used by French theorists. It originally was formulated by Jacques Derrida to represent a criticism of the most significant binary between speech and writing in his essay ‘Signature Event’. Écriture here is a concept that speaks of in a self referential mode. The concept is used to bring out the factors that a text would provide with the notion of a temporality and the spatial dispersion of the ideas that it would inhere. But this very concept when used in writing has transposed the characteristics of an author to a position of anonymity. The nature of such scientific study of the work by the author will let it bring out a form of religious and spiritual mode of characteristics to the work. Furthermore by providing the work by an author, Foucault questions about the position of the work being transcended to a certain form of theological affirmation spiritual origin. He further argues that if writing is put on to the surface to explain out of a certain historical affluence, it means that the writing should be elucidated through certain implicit characterization by providing a meaning which transcends its basic meaning for what it stands for.

Foucault then explains the problems which is imposed due to the use of the name of the author and the problems that are created by the functional use of an author’s name. A certain name of an author stands as an institution in itself especially when particular meaning is attempted to be inerded from it. It is observed that the name of a certain author provides with a category for him to belong into. Such a category is indicative of the concerned pattern that an author would like to follow. Foucault describes how a certain alteration of an author’s work can bring a change among the likes of the people or them following the function of the established author. He puts into perspective, how the work of authors define their function as authors and
any alterations made to the already established believe of their body of work changes the perspective of people with regard to understanding the author. He gives the example of a change that may be evident if one can establish that some of the sonnets attributed by Shakespeare is actually not written by him. This may drastically change the general believe of how Shakespeare works as an author in a reader’s mind.

1.3 The properties of an “author-function” and its working through various discourses

Foucault adds that the name of an author serves as an entity that is not limited to its singular function of a certain idea but it acts as a whole ‘classification’ that can differentiate itself from other texts and consequently can create a relationship among the other texts. In this regard, the writer quotes,

*An author’s name is not simply an element of speech.*

An author’s name does also characterize a particular manner of existence of discourse. For Foucault, the name of an author comes with a preponderance of a function that survives through ages. The body of work that an author involves himself tends to create a discourse which regulates in the form of culture that he comes up from. Such discourses are brought up by the homogenized character of work that several writers contribute through their works. For instance, writers like Hermes, Hippocrates and Balzac although are different generic writers but the vast body of work are brought together to create a common discourse. But according to Foucault there exist too, many discontinuities among the authors and their relationship with the discourses. Such discontinuities could be resolved by the use of originating subjects or the common usage of a language which would support the interpretation. Thereby, the name of an
author in our culture functions as a certain variable which is known to the masses through his works and the certain discourse that he falls into. An author before defining its belongingness or function into a discourse, one must consider the various characteristics that may differentiate a certain discourse from other discourses.

Discourses according to Foucault, is created by the appropriation of rules and codifications which has been established since throughout the years. Such a discourse is created with exact appropriation of culture in order to differentiate through the various bipolar fields of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous. While adapting to the appropriation of culture of the moment, a writer of the present age (starting from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century) had to accept the law of social property but at the same time, there was a change of duties which prompted the inclusion of a transgressive property within the work that a writer represents. Such a restoration of systematic practice of transgression creates a danger of writing on one side and puts a benefit of property on the other. Secondly, Foucault explains that the author-function has not been a universal or constant phenomenon in all the discourses. By this he means throughout ages, the author-function has received a different reception among the people, where at times the literary texts which included stories, folk tales, epics were accepted by people alongwith its anonymity by the people but through the Middle Ages the texts which were scientific in its genre was accepted only if the names of the author was indicated. The scientific works by Pliny, Hippocrates were accepted with its entire competency and was able to create a discourse by themselves. But during seventeenth and eighteenth century, a totally new conception was developed where the scientific texts were accepted basing on its true merit and competency. The theorems established by a author was accepted and welcomed when it provided with a coherent truth and proven with
verification. But the literary texts on the other hand were not accepted without the mention of its author. Every text published during the period was made to have mentioned the author, place and the circumstances of its writing. The background of the work was as necessary as the owner of the work.

Furthermore, Foucault explains that the author function is not formed merely by the ‘simple attribution of the discourse to an individual’. Rather, it is formed through a very complex mode of process wherein there remains a profound endeavor to create a rational entity called “author”. The construction of an individual as an author involves many “realistic” dimensions alongwith the incorporation of his individualized creative power. But such aspects of the individual in becoming an author according to Foucault are mere projections of the readers which are psychologically guided, involve the comparisons of various works, the qualities that are deemed important, the various techniques the readers purposely select to continue and also the various exclusions of knowledge and techniques too. Such practices and choices of techniques among the readers varies from one particular time to another. In the same sense, there is a difference between the construction of a poet and a philosopher. Furthermore, there is a vast difference between the constructions of a novel of eighteenth century is different from that of a modern novel, but according to Foucault there remain many “transhistorical” constant reasons for the change of the image of an author in every age. Foucault explains it by giving an example from the traditional Christian methods of defining an author's name which was to derive into an authentic conclusion by referring to already existing texts.

Foucault explains it by giving an example from the traditional Christian methods of defining an author's name which was to derive into an authentic conclusion by referring to already existing texts. Saint Jerome according to Foucault is one of those people who have
written in detail on author-function through the various texts and body of work that he has worked on. Foucault through the theologian named Jerome proposes the need of a detachment of the author from the text. He proposes that the text which does not support the general dogma for which the author is known for should be eliminated from the list of the texts attributed to him. Further, if qualitatively certain text does not live up to the expected level of standard as compared to the other texts must be eliminated. Thirdly, a text should not be accounted if it is written in a different form, styles and phrases not found in other texts. Lastly, the events which show the subsequent ways and possibilities leading to the death of an author must also be omitted.

Although the modern criticism for Foucault does not fully prescribe the same rules but there are several similarities present in Jerome's notion of how an author works. The author through a text describes about the events that have taken place in the past and in certain age many changes have transformed into becoming revolutions. An author tends to become a symbol of Unity, who through his writing is able to produce and write of the various changes and evolutions that occurred throughout society. So, even though Saint Jerome's principles of author function might seem inadequate but it does bring out the modern notions of author functions to an extent. But it would also be false to refer each signs in a text attributing to the author. Throughout a text, many signs are attributed to the author but such signs according to Foucault have a different form of bearing on the texts with the author and the texts without an author. When a text is without an author the signs or the “shifters” refers to a real speaker and to an actual situation of events. It can be explained thus that when a certain discourse is linked to an author the shifters works in a complex way. While reading a novel written in the first person pronoun or various places presented in a localized way do not necessarily underscores the
relevance to the writer but rather such details of work stands for itself as a “second self” which is always subjected to various changes and alterations. Thereby there should always exist a form of division between the author and the writer within the novel but there might be difference of opinion when one can say such difference can only exist within the “quasi-discourses” like novel and poetry. But in fact for Foucault any discourse that supports the "author-function" can be characterized with such multiplicity of egos. Speaking of quasi-discourse, he speaks of the differences that builds up the composition of “I” in the mathematical treatise and the “I” which determines the body of work in the texts as the former “I” implies a certain special and unique individual who completes a certain work given at certain time but the latter suggests an instance and a demonstration that can be performed by any individual provided he or she is following the noted preliminary rules and the symbols are used for its function. Thirdly, there is also a possibility of the formation of a third type of “I” or ego which would encounter the various obstacles and problems faced during a certain investigation. The author-function thus can be carried out through the discussed egos.

After discussing the various forms of author function, Foucault is of the view that the “author-function” although is tied with certain laws and rules but it doesn't operate in a similar way in all the discourses and is subjected to change through culture, times and discourses. It is not defined by a plain subsequent procedure of attributing a work to its writer but it can be defined by a plain subsequent procedure of attributing a work to its writer but it can be defined by following a certain procedure and furthermore, it can be referred not just to a single individual as it can produce various form of “egos” while subjectively producing and referring to individuals coming from any class. Proceeding through the discussion of an author Foucault now terms an author who is the creator of a discourse not of a text or a book but of a theory, a
tradition or even a discipline to be in a position that can be called “transdiscursive” position. Such authors are responsible of proliferating many other great texts from their works and contribute to a whole civilization with knowledge and power. Examples of such authors are Homer, Aristotle, Church Fathers who have manifested knowledge of various kinds through their works. But according to Foucault, nineteenth century saw the coming of a singular type of authors who do not necessarily falls into the generic category of “great” literary authors or religious texts or can be essentially called the founder of science. Authors like Freud and Marx through their works like ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ or ‘Communist Manifesto’ respectively possessed the potential of creating endless discourses. With regard to the literary discourses like novels, Foucault explains novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe do have its own function of presenting its influence to the creation of a genre called Gothic Romance in Nineteenth Century. However, the possibilities contributed by the discursive authors like Feud and Marx are quite different then the literary authors like Radcliffe. In case of Radcliffe, certain similar characteristic signs, figures, relationships and structures could be incorporated into other texts of the same form of genre of Gothic Romance but the work by the initiators of discursive practices tend to clear a space or creates a space where a writer can create elements more than the initiators themselves. They are able establish a paradigm which manifested into creating a genre of itself. Such an established paradigm of school of thoughts Foucault called it as “discursive insaturations”. It is able to designate more analysis of various subjects through such discourses. Freud through his work on psychoanalysis not just influenced Karl Abraham or Melanie Klein but he made possible various other discourses through books, concepts and hypotheses into the wider prospects of works based on psychoanalytic discourse.
Freud through his work on psychoanalysis not just influenced Karl Abraham or Melanie Klein but he made possible various other discourses through books, concepts and hypotheses into the wider prospects of works based on psychoanalytic discourse. It might appear to have a similar form of response that can be seen erupting from a work belonging to the field of science. For example, the laws that Galileo created was after all later used by other various writers indirectly and it can be said that it is Galileo's unprecedented contribution to the scientific field he worked that was capable of creating many more discourses. But according to Foucault, there are some fundamental differences between the function of discursive practices and of any scientific endeavor. In a scientific program the function act can be said to have an equal position to that of the various transformative changes that may occur later. The initial program in any scientific endeavor is a single instance of a general phenomenon. There exists a form of possible change with regard to the transformations that a certain function act of science can create and can be rechanneled than the way it has been instituted. Owing to the differences, Foucault adds that the discursive practices works in a way which transforms into a many heterogeneous transformation of discourses form its initial discursive practice. It is capable of exploring many other applications and does not limit itself to the generalized view of the inaugurative value but rather possessed a derivative value to itself.

Another important distinction between a discursive practice and scientific program is that the initial aspects of a discursive practice are overshadowed by the various developments and transformations that take place later on. The initial concept of the practice diminishes and the validity of any new development is marked with respect to the initial concept of the discursive practise. But on the other hand, in the scientific discovery the newer developments are based on the structural and intrinsic norms already established in that particular space of scientific subject.
Thus, it can be understood that the various works or developments of the initiators functions through the science or the certain practices that they tend to produce and it is science or other discursive practice that relate through the works of these initiators. Foucault now focuses on the concept of the "return to the origin" which marks the importance of returning back to the initial conception of any form of discursive practice or science. He introduces to the concepts of "rediscoveries" and "reactivations" where he marks its differences by stating that rediscoveries showcases the flow or analogy of the current concepts by revisiting or allowing the obscured conceptions long forgotten. For instance, Noam Chomsky, an American linguist rediscovered a form of knowledge used through many writers like Cordemoy and Humboldt with respect to the workings or manifesting a form of ‘generative grammar’ that evolved out by retrospection through the previous established concepts. On the other hand reactivation as explained by Foucault is the re-introduction of a certain discourse into a totally new domain, practice and transformations. An example of reactivation can be shown by the work of Michel Serres who through the history of mathematics have used this phenomenon to produce various other works on mathematical anamnesis. Thereby it can be understood that the term "return to" designates an initiation of many other discursive practices from one single conception. It can also be added that if we return to the initial concept it is not because of the constructive omission and as such the initiation of the concept in its essence is liable to its own distortions. But the distortions according to Foucault should be as such able to return back to the point of initiation. There occurs a barrier due to the omission of many things from the

1.4 The function of the "return to the origin" concept

Foucault speaks of returning or revisiting the initial concepts which seemed to face certain lack of attention. The readers tend to put focus on the things which have been masked by
the omission. In this action of revisiting a certain concept or initiation, two major characteristic can be observed which arises out of the new approach to the topic. Firstly, the changes that can be observed after a revisit is by having a perusal reading or knowing how to read a certain text carefully. Secondly, to understand the meaning of words not directly from the text but rather by observing the relationships of the words and the purpose of the use of the words that separates their meaning from other words. Although here Foucault assures the vantage of returning back to the initiation or discursivity but he directs with the fact that such a return does not follow a mechanical and historical process to make the prior concept seemed redoubled from its original form rather it is an important step to witness a certain transformed discursive branch of knowledge. He gives the example of books by Galileo, Marx and Freud, as such how it may be able to transform the already acquired knowledge of history by reading Galileo or it may help to render more knowledge on the field of psychoanalysis or Marxism by reading Freud and Marx.

Furthermore, Foucault explains that such return to texts imply the rebuilding of the relationship that exist between a text and its author. For instance a sudden rediscovery of a text by Newton or Cantor will not put a question to the established thoughts and ideas on Classical Cosmology but the return would mean the change of our understanding and of appreciation toward these writers. Thus, by reading books like *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* by Sigmund Freud makes the readers shift to a newer discursive study of the branch of knowledge and makes a form of relationship which can be seen between any fundamental concept and the mediate authors. Here mediate authors, refers to the author who has worked on a fundamental concept and have added more to the branch of knowledge through its study making it a discursive practice. Concluding the essay, Foucault sites the importance of such attention given to the role of discussion of initiation of various discursive discourses. Such a discussion of discourses can
lead to forms of ‘typology’ but such a form cannot be sufficiently discussed by observing the grammatical features, formal structures or certain objects of discourse.

Discourses like these needs wider investigation that would provide with more clear distinction of various discourses that may possibly evolve and the many relationships (or non-relationship) that an author can form remain one of such discursive property and with these investigations a new form of historical analysis of discourse develops. Foucault further talks about the necessary need of the time to investigate discourses based on its existence which is inclusive of modifications, variations that a culture may carry throughout, and its modes of circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation. In this regard, an “author function” can also be responsible to show how an author through its numerous relationships within a text and outside of it can reveal the functions of the social relationships.

By discussing various other themes and knowledge through internal analysis of a work, Foucault put into representation the possible suspicion of a subject that an author creates and its creative role that it offers for according to him by delimiting psychological and biographical references in a work, it must not entirely evolve out of the subject rather, it must be able to provide the required intervention of the function that the subject can offer and to restore the originating theme of the subject. It must also be made clear thus that the role that a subject play in the course of creating a certain discourse, a subject's position and how does it appear, its functions and the rules the subject has to follow.
Check Your Progress Questions

1. State whether True or False:
   (i) The ‘visuality of character’ demanded the characterisation of the author too in earlier times.
   (ii) Foucault's purpose of the essay was not to deviate from emotions while in the act of writing.
   (iii) The concept ‘ericture’ has transposed the characteristics of an author to a position of anonymity.
   (iv) For Foucault, the name of an author does not come with a preponderance of a function that survives through ages.
   (v) The construction of an individual as an author involves many “realistic” dimensions.

2. Who have written on author-function with regard to the body of work by an author?

3. Which novel contributed immensely to the growth of the genre ‘Gothic Romance’?

4. Name the two concepts that were introduced by Foucault within the concept “return to origin”.

5. Whose work can be given as an example of ‘reactivation’ in the field of Mathematics?

6. Name the book written by Sigmund Freud which contributed immensely to the field of Psychoanalysis.

7. How many types of authors does Foucault suggest to exist? Name them.

1.5 Let us sum up:

In this unit, we have discussed the role of an author and how his name functions to contribute to a certain discourse or any branch of knowledge. We also learn the importance of the relationship that is formed between the author and the text. The seminal work by Roland Barthes named the “Death of the Author” cannot be read in isolation but with connection to this essay by Michael
Foucault. The essay follows an intellectual tradition as shown by Barthes to interpret the work or significance of an author. The author as a figure is established as someone who has particular functional principle to follow within a culture. With the change of time and space an author's function can be seen as changing and the newer and wider knowledge within discourses have been manifested throughout. Positing on the role of the author-function Foucault describes the specific manner in which an author's name functions in a discourse and in a certain culture. Furthermore, Foucault posits that the function of an author changes with respect to the discourses. He argues that the word “author” stands for social and cultural force as the relevance of the writing of any literary works is more prominent to the uses of the society then of the writer himself. The value of any writing by an author becomes the end result of a category of work or sense of a body of work by following a certain literary style or adding to already established literary ideas. Foucault was acting against a formal reading of a literary work and of romanticized thoughts. He emphasized on the fact that Writing must be freed from the need to express and must be able to explain itself. Writing for Foucault possessed the right to kill the author and become its own master.

1.6 Keywords:

1 Discourse: Foucault defined discourse as ways of constituting knowledge together with social practises, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. Foucault adopted the term ‘discourse’ to denote a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning. It is a way of organising knowledge that structures the constitution of social relations through the collective understanding of the discursive logic and the acceptance of the discourse as social fact.
Ecriture: The term was formulated by Jacques Derrida which was the result of a significant binary between speech and writing. He conceptualised it as any system that is characterised by difference and absence. Foucault on the other hand sees ecriture as a way of understanding the concept of author.

Marxist: Marxist is the one who supports the political and economic theories of Marxism propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxism is a form of socio-economic analysis that analyses class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation.

1.7 Suggested Readings:


(ii) Jane Gallop: The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time.

(iii) Michel Foucault: Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews

(iv) Michel Foucault: The Order of Things.

Possible Answers to Check Your Progress questions

1. (i) True; (ii) False; (iii) True; (iv) False; (v) True
2. Saint Jerome
4. Rediscoveries and Reactivations.
5. Michel Serres
7. Two Types. Transdiscursive and Founder of Discursivity.
References:


Model Questions:

1. Explain how author as a societal figure is responsible in bringing ideas and culture together.

2. Explain why Foucault puts special emphasis on the “return to origin” as a concept to show the function of an author.

3. Discuss the characteristics that are needed to establish an individual as an “author” as presented in the essay “What is an Author”.

4. Discuss critically how the essays of both Barthes and Foucault are relevant at the present context of Contemporary Literary Writing.
Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences

Jacques Derrida

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Poststructuralism and Its Basic ideas

1.3 Introducing Jacques Derrida as a prominent practitioner of Poststructuralism

1.4 Introducing the text ‘Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’

1.5 A Brief Summary of the text

Check Your Progress

1.6 Let us sum up

1.7 Keywords

1.8 Suggested Readings

Possible Answers to Check Your Progress

References

Model Questions
1.0 Objectives

This unit encompasses a study of Jacques Derrida’s essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ which he had presented at the John Hopkins University in 1966. The objectives of the unit are,

• To give an insight into the critical persona of Jacques Derrida as a literary theorist of the Post War era.
• To discuss the tenets of Poststructuralism as a theoretical school.
• To understand the link between the school of Poststructuralism and Derrida.
• To introduce the text ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’.
• To give a critical summary of the text.
• To critically discuss Derrida’s ideas as reflected in the text.

1.1 Introduction

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) was a French philosopher who is famous as the pioneer of the theoretical approach called Deconstruction. He is one of the primary figures of the school of Poststructuralism and Postmodern philosophy. His concept of Deconstruction refers to a study of the relationship between text and its meaning. He views language as a complex entity having its own transcendental nature. He looks at language as a basis to arrive at the meaning that a text can convey to its readers. The theoretical approach of Poststructuralism to which Derrida is associated with is considered to be both a continuation and rejection of the approach of Structuralism. The approach argues that knowledge does not come in systematic structures because culture and chronology are subjects to various interpretations of people. Additionally, Postmodern philosophy goes against the ideals of the then ongoing philosophical approaches.
starting with the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Postmodern philosophy argues that there is no objective reality and grand narratives of it, instead there is the construction of reality and there are increasing role of power relationships in it. Derrida’s theoretical ideas are rooted in them.

Derrida’s renowned critical works are *Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference, Dissemination, Speech and Phenomena, Positions, Acts of Literature, Aporias, Ethics, Institutions and the Right to Philosophy* and so on. It is notable that most of his works have been translated into English from French. Some noticeable critical ideas of Derrida are deconstruction, differance, freeplay, arche-writing, metaphysics of presence, rupture, aporia and so on.

### 1.2 Poststructuralism and Its Basic ideas

Poststructuralism is a movement different from Structuralism. It derives from Structuralism—sometimes being a follower of it while at times being its strict opponent. Poststructuralists fall into certain groups—the contributors of the Tel Quel which is a French journal, the group of Gilles Deluze and Felix Guttari and later that of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. The Tel Quel group consisted of critics like Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes. The primary highlight of Poststructuralism is to break the idea of the reality. It primarily seeks to dismiss the concept called structure journeying from society to culture to the domain of language. Derrida’s idea of Deconstruction means to deconstruct the idea of the wholeness of reality and argues to split it into diversified interpretations. Julia Kristeva applied the poststructuralist thoughts into the genres of Feminism, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis. Moreover as a movement in social structure, Poststructuralism views the role of power in the functioning of society. Michel Foucault looks at language as a role player in the exercise of
power in society. According to him a text carries discourse which is constituted by power politics. Additionally Saussure’s idea of arbitrariness between signifier and signified is attacked by the Psychoanalytic ideas of Jacques Lacan. According to him language is a signifying chain where there is a play between words and meanings. Critically observing Psychoanalysis he argues that the ‘unconscious is structured like language’. Poststructuralism also argued for the death of the author as done by Roland Barthes. He argues that the text does not refer to any specific meaning as soon as it gets published it becomes the property of the readers who are assigned the liberty to interpret it in their ways. Thus Poststructuralism is keen in spreading ideas like plurality, diversity, openness, play, decentering and so on.

1.3 Introducing Jacques Derrida as a prominent practitioner of Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a big umbrella term of which Deconstruction is a small part. It is an important element in Poststructuralism. Deconstruction is a prime concern of Poststructuralist thinkers. It is Jacques Derrida who initiated the term. According to him there is no center of everything. A signifier does not lead to a signified, instead it leads to another signifier which also does the same thing. Thus in place of a sign with the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified there is room for incessant signifiers. According to Derrida there is no specific meaning which is directed by a specific word; rather there is the deferral of meaning. There is a system of differances. Poststructuralism does not argue that all elements of human culture including literary all fall into the system of signs whose construction is structural. Poststructuralism therefore uses Deconstruction as suggested by Derrida to break the structure of society, culture and even literature.
As a Poststructuralist critic Derrida gives an interesting insight into meaning; according to him, meaning is deferred that is meaning is both present and absent at the same time in a text. Hence in his view, there is always opportunity for multiple understandings or meaning in a text or the reality of the surroundings. Another significant concept while reading Derrida as a Poststructuralist critic is logocentrism which suggests that before the composition of a text there lies certain ideas or conditions or intentions. Arguing against this he says that while reading a text the search for the presence of a definite idea or intention which is supposed to have pre-existed before language and which can lead to meaning making process is intensely flawed.

1.4 Introducing the text ‘Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’

Derrida’s essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ is a remarkable paper that he had presented at the John Hopkins University on 21st October, 1966. The essay is remarkable because it had launched Derrida’s idea of Poststructuralism encompassing decentering, freemplay, rupture and so on. In this essay Derrida concentrates on the traits of Western metaphysics and critically contemplates over the concepts of structure and center. The lecture is highly eulogised to be the fore-runner of Poststructuralist thought. This lecture of Derrida was later published as chapter of his remarkable work Writing and Difference.

1.5 A Brief Summary of the text

Derrida’s essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ clearly defines and describes many of the remarkable Poststructuralist concepts. His catalogue begins with the idea of ‘freemplay’. He argues that the concept freemplay refers to the employment of decentering process on a system without isolating the system from its whole existence. That means freemplay talks about decentering a system within its system. He argues that centering within
a system leads it to discard freeplay. It suggests putting a principle on a system by making it rigid and limited. On the contrary freeplay comes out of the application of desire, not any strict principle. Defining a structure Derrida argues that there are historic patterns and repetitions which have been diachronically there in that structure. However at the same time in these patterns there exist certain entities which can serve as substitutions for the centre of the structure. Herein Derrida presents his concept of ‘rupture’ or ‘redoubling’ by which he means that moment when this act of substituting the center of the structure takes place. When this rupture takes place these historic patterns and repetitions re-centers the structure by decentring it and thus paves way for the play of freepaly within the system of the structure. Freeplay thus goes against the conventional historic pattern. Derrida talks about the three major decentering criticism by Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger and argues that they all use the language of metaphysics while decentering metaphysics itself.

Derrida mentions the theoretical ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss in his book *The Savage Mind*. He says that Levi-Strauss talks about two kinds of things—one that exists necessarily and another that take place contingently. Derrida argues that the events of the world exist contingently. Strauss’ ideas of the Engineer and the Bricoleur are brought in by Derrida. He says that the Engineer works with concepts while the Bricoleur with signs. Derrida argues that concepts give transparent ideas about the concerned reality while signs open vistas for the interposition between culture and the surrounding. On the basis of this Derrida gives his insights on the structurality of structure. According to him a structure is neutralized or reduced as soon as it is given a center or a fixed origin. This centring of the structure limits the role of play within its periphery. Consequently the result is a totality oriented organised structure which Derrida disapproves of. He argues that since classical times it has been thought that in the world there is
the presence of a center which is solid, static and omnipotent in its own ways. He cites Aristotle’s idea of the ‘Prime Mover’ in this regard—the thought that in the world there is a static power that is a Godlike entity of orderliness which is present somewhere. This classical concept of structure is called ‘contradictory coherence’ by Derrida. Contrarily he says that in the genre of decentering there is inherent presence of anxiety and lack of determination which is restrained from the fixity of meaning and interpretation. Derrida argues that totalization is a non-existent entity; and as soon as freeplay takes place the movement of supplementary condition occurs. Towards the end Derrida goes back to the ideas of Levi-Strauss and says that in his *Conversations, The Savage Mind* and *Race and History* the tensions inherent in the role of play are focused. In the manner of Nietzsche Derrida argues that there is irreducible plurality in the world and all naming is characterised by ‘differance’, a process where something is always under erasure. He argues that all men are bricoleurs working on signs and thus carrying the potential to be creative in respective ways. Hence Derrida posits that there are interpretations of interpretation of structure, sign and play.

**Check Your Progress**

**Short Questions:**

1. Find out the **True/ False** answers:

   (i) Derrida abandoned the idea of Transcendental Signified.

   (ii) Difference is a term by Derrida.

   (iii) *The Savage Mind* is written by Jacques Derrida.

   (iv) Levi Staruss talks about the Engineer and the Bricoleur.

   (v) Free play refers to the free play of signifiers.
2. What is bricolage?

3. What does Derrida mean by erasure?

4. What is Derrida’s idea of the structure?

5. What is freeplay?

6. What is Deconstruction?

7. What does Aporia mean?

8. What is arche writing?

9. What does Metaphysics of presence refer to?

1.6 Let us sum up

In this unit we have discussed the basic traits of Poststructuralism and the role of Derrida as a leading figure of the school. We have also got an introduction of the prescribed essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ covering the account behind its presentation and publication. We have also discussed a brief summarising account on the context and ideas in the essay. The unit highlights the critical ideas of the Poststructuralist critic Jacques Derrida.

1.7 Keywords

1Structuralism: A critical school in the human sciences originating in Europe during the twentieth century. The school looked at society and culture in terms of sign systems and their signification. The Structuralist view of signification is fixed which Poststructuralism critiqued.

2Semiotics: It is a science of signs. It was propounded by philosopher C. S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure.
1.8 Suggested Readings

(i) J.A. Cuddon & M. A. R. Habib: *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*.

(ii) Terry Eagleton: * Literary Theory: An Introduction.*

(iii) Patricia Waugh: *Literary Theory and Criticism*.

(iv) Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*.

(v) Donald D. Palmer: *Structuralism and Poststructuralism for Beginners*.

**Possible Answers to Check Your Progress**

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<td>(iv) True</td>
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<td>(v) True</td>
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<td>2. Bricolage refers to the act of creation from diverse elements which are already existent in the universe.</td>
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<td>3. Derrida argues that in the process of reading there is the role of presence and absence. The presence of an entity relates the absence of another. Hence he says that there is always something which is under erasure. This he also calls the process of differance.</td>
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<td>4. According to Derrida structure refers to the system in which there is the freeplay of various interpretations. To him, structure escapes the dominance of a fixed center.</td>
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5. When in a structure there is no imposition on the presence of a fixed center freeplay is given space in it. Freeplay decenters the system within its system.

6. Deconstruction is an idea which critiques the assumptions of metaphysics regarding the structure of an event or events in a text. It pleads for the decentering of centres in the system and thus seeks to highlight the complex state among various centers with a structure.

7. By aporia Derrida refers to the gap or impasse that takes place while reading a text. He says that when various ideas complicate or create puzzle while reading the same thing a state of aporia occurs.

8. Arche-writing means that language cannot be contained within the parameters of metaphysics of presence. Language carries the play of differences between various forms of it—the presence and absence of the ideas.

9. Metaphysics of Presence refers to the idea that language carries the presence of certain insights within it. Derrida denies it by saying that language at the same time can carry both the presence and absence of certain ideas. And thus meaning or centers can be diversified and open.

References


**Model Questions**

1. “The center is not the center”. Comment on Derrida’s views on Structuralist limitations in the context of the above statement in his essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.’

2. Discuss how Derrida’s ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ articulates the break between structuralism and post structuralism.

3. Critically comment on the views expressed by Derrida in his essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’.

The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious

Jacques Lacan

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 The emergence of Psychoanalysis or Psychoanalytic Criticism

1.3 Jacques Lacan and Psychoanalysis

1.4 Introducing the text ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’

1.5 A brief summary of the text

Check Your Progress

1.6 Let us sum up

1.7 Keywords

1.8 Suggested Readings

Possible Answers to Check Your Progress

References

Model Questions
1.0 Objectives

The focus of this unit is the essay written by Jacques Lacan entitled ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’. The objectives of the unit are,

- To give an apt introduction on Jacques Lacan as a practitioner of the twentieth century literary criticism.
- To discuss Psychoanalysis or Psychoanalytic Criticism as a literary critical school and its various facets.
- To evaluate Lacan’s contribution to Psychoanalysis.
- To introduce the text ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’.
- To present a critical summary of the text.
- To discuss the Lacanian ideas of Psychoanalysis as reflected in the text.

1.1 Introduction

Jacques Marie Emile Lacan (1901-1981) is a French Psychoanalyst and Psychiatrist of the twentieth century. His association with the school of Psychoanalytic criticism helped in the emergence of new insights into the genre. He was a Post-Freudian critic of Psychoanalysis. Moreover he was a Poststructuralist owing to which center or totality-based ideas of Psychoanalysis are not part of his critical bent of mind. He studies the development of an infant from six to eighteen months. He argues that the Mirror Stage¹ of the infant make his subjectivity grow inside him. His Psychoanalytical idea was directed by his thoughts on lack and desire in the human mind. He talks about three kinds of lacks or orders—the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. This helps in the growth of human as a rational individual. Moreover Lacan also studies the relationship between the unconscious and language and famously argues that the
unconscious is structured like language. It takes part inside the subjectivity of the self which can be called the other. The path breaking works by Lacan are *Ecrits, My Teaching, The Seminar, Feminine Sexuality* and so on.

### 1.2 The emergence of Psychoanalysis or Psychoanalytic Criticism

The key foundation of Psychoanalysis or Psychoanalytic school of criticism which started in the twentieth century is structured on the theories and writings of Sigmund Freud. This kind of criticisms argues for the perusal of literary texts on the basis of psychological development and conflict. Freudian Psychoanalysis posits that narratives in the texts are revelation of the desires and anxieties of the unconscious mind. According to Freud’s Psychoanalysis since childhood humans are into the habit of repressing certain desires of them mostly sexuality because they are part of the society. This censoring leads them to subside certain desires, feelings and thoughts of them in their very tender age and this is how the psychological state of humanity is conditioned. Freudian Psychoanalysis says that literary texts are the expressions of repressed desires of humans, a reader of them might find familiarity in the events which leads them to a sensation which Freud calls ‘Uncanny’. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams* he talks about how humans repress their desires and thoughts and studies the relationship between Shakespeare’s Hamlet with his parents. Freud was a neurologist and his theorists are based on his studies on his patients. He also talks about the Oedipus Complex and Castration Complex which refers to the conflict oriented psychic relationship between parents and children. In addition to Freud, Harold Bloom also contributed to the genre of Psychoanalysis. In his *The Anxiety of Influence* he argues that every poet is directed by anxiety of his precursor poets who cast influence on him. Additionally Jacques Lacan also hugely contributed to the body of Psychoanalytic Criticism with his respective theories and ideas. His psychoanalytic views are known as Post-Freudian. In his
remarkable work *Écrits* he offers both Structuralist and Poststructuralist analysis of Freud’s Psychoanalytic theories.

### 1.3 Jacques Lacan and Psychoanalysis

As a practitioner of Psychoanalytic Criticism Jacques Lacan directs his attention to the imaginary which is the elected domain of binary oppositions and of the ego. It is the ideal representation of oneself dogged by three passions—love, hate and ignorance. Lacan argues that a little child after beholding its reflection on the mirror considers that to be the other, but later reveals the fact that it is actually a fake identity of itself. Thus a child learns to imagine things and in his imaginary stage Lacan studies the longing of human beings to identify himself with the mirror image. He discusses another stage—the symbolic stage. This stage means the sense of realization of the actual fact. Despite their longing human beings face the realization of the gap between what they desire for and what they actually are. It is the course of how to make children learn their reality. Here Lacan makes language enter. Human desires can become discourse only through the help of language. For the unconscious to get importance language is the highly essential element however there is one shared reality which helps in making coordination between imaginary and the symbolic stage. This is the real stage. It manifests itself in the unexpected and resists symbolization. Lacan talks about a formation of the unconscious which relates the subject to the inaccessible other through the mediation of the object.

As a practitioner of Psychoanalysis, Lacan lays emphasis on desire. He argues that the human beings inhabit in discourse. The function of desire is both to give a figure to the other’s desire and to provide a glimpse at its impossible death end. The crux about desire is that it is constitutively for nothing namable. Lacan calls it ‘power of pure loss’. It is to be linked to the
drive toward destruction which Lacan mentions as the death drive. He argues that there is no fixity of desire. The real is the site of missed encounters which Lacan calls ‘object a’ standing for the other.

1.4 Introducing the text ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’

Lacan’s ‘The Insistence of the Unconscious or Reason since Freud’ is an essay revealing the Psychoanalytical ideas of the writer. The essay was originally delivered as a paper on May 6, 1957 in Sorbonne. It was later published in Lacan’s renowned book *Ecrits*. In the essay Lacan makes an analytical study of the relationship between speech, language and subject. The essay is divided into three parts—‘The Meaning of the Letter’, ‘The Letter in the Unconscious’ and ‘The Letter, being and the Other’. In the first section Lacan talks about the concept of the ‘letter’; Lacan talks about the letter as a support that language offers to discourse. In the second section he contemplates over the relationship between the unconscious and the letter. He argues that the letter is the production of the unconscious. In the third segment he posits that language that is concretized in the form of the letter is not always successful totally to communicate because the correlation between signifier and signified is not definite and determinate.

1.5 A brief summary of the text

Lacan in his essay scrutinizes the unconscious by equating it with the structural pattern of language. He argues in the very beginning of the essay that the unconscious is wide area having inherent relationship with language. Introducing his key word of the essay ‘the letter’ as the material support to concretize subjects, he argues that language and its structure preexist and humanity enters into it the course of their growth. Thus language or discourse enslaves those who speak them. And though apparently the substance of the discourse appears to be the
experience of humanity Lacan posits that the ways of experiencing takes place according to the tradition of discourse. Lacan then cites a formula which he presents to be the foundation of linguistics: S/s. He says that this ‘Signifier over signified’ formula having been based on the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified and the sign owes its existence to Ferdinand de Saussure. However Lacan doubts the separateness that Saussure assigns the signifier and signified to be and says that meaning is possible by its potential to refer to another meaning either synonymous or antonymous manner. Hence he replaces Saussure’s example of ‘the tree’ and its referring to the physical tree and cites that of the words ‘ladies’ and ‘gentlemen’ and argues that both these signifiers can refer to the same signified. Thus Lacan argues that there is always a signifying chain in the structure of language. Depending on the usage of the word the bond between a signifier and as signified can be diversified and varied. He also says that meaning does not consist the chain of signifiers, rather it insists it. He means that meaning is open depending on its application and context. Hence to Lacan signifier and signified are not definitely separated so as to lead to meaning, instead there is the unstoppable sliding between them—the signified slides under the signifier incessantly. Lacan also argues that the signifying chains are both horizontal and vertical in nature. Hence he refers to the concepts of metonymy and metaphor and argues that a signifier makes meaning in these two ways. He says that when in the application of metonymy one thing is substituted by the other the connection between the two entities in the action of substitution lies in the presence of the signifier. Moreover in case of the usage of metaphor two signifies are actualized. Here one signifier stays concealed in the signifying chain. Lacan opines that it is the letter or the material support which materializes the spirit of humanity. And this spirit refers to the unconscious.
Lacan’s analysis of Freud’s idea of the unconscious leads him to cite the latter’s renowned work *The Interpretation of Dreams* where it is argued that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. Lacan contends that Freudian analysis of dream allows him to look at it literally. Basing himself on Freud’s idea of distortion in the functioning of dreams, Lacan argues that if dream is to be looked at as signifier the presence of two slopes working in this regard can be found—condensation and displacement. Condensation like metaphor refers to the diversified application of signifiers while displacement like metonymy is the substitution of signifier. The unconscious thus works within the ambit of these two slopes. Lacan formulates a new theory here which is similar to S/s, f(S)1/s. This transforms the occurrence of the signifier on the signified. He propounds another symbol which suggests the horizontal relationship between signifiers and signified, f(S . . . S') S= S (-) s. Here the signifier is not definite about its relationship with the object of the world. There is also the lack of specified meaning in the symbol and thus it is suggested by Lacan that even in dreams there is no literal fixity of meaning. Lacan also symbolizes the metaphoric slope, f(S/S)S=S(+)s. This represents the substitution for signifier for signifier which leads to the meaning making process. It is intensely poetic. Lacan also brings in the famous Enlightenment utterance by Rene Descartes, ‘I think therefore I am’ and gives his psychoanalytical version of it and says, “I think where I am not. Therefore I am where I think not.” As he argues that in the signifying chain a man is objectified.

In the third section of the essay Lacan takes Freud’s discovery of the unconscious again and argues that to Freud the goal of the unconscious is that of harmony and reconciliation which Lacan challenges. He even in a celebratory manner talks about Freud’s discovery of the heteronomous nature of the human self. However on the basis of this he offers an interesting insight regarding the unconscious. He says that since humans carry heterogeneous nature in their
identities, and this heterogeneity takes place nowhere but inside the human self only, the unconscious is nothing but a discourse of the other. Lacan praises Freud for his stupendous discovery of the split of the human self.

Check Your Progress

Short Questions

1. Find out the True/False answer:

   (i) Lacan pursues a reading of Freud in the essay.

   (ii) “I think therefore I am” is famously said by Rene Descartes.

   (iii) The Interpretation of Dreams was written by Lacan.

   (iv) Lacan argues for a chain of signifiers.

   (v) ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’ is a chapter in Freud’s Ecrits.

2. What is Condensation?

3. What do you mean by Displacement?

4. How does Lacan see the letter?

1.6 Let us sum up

In this unit we have studied the features of the school of Psychoanalysis and the significance of Jacques Lacan as a practitioner of it. The unit has given an introductory segment on the prescribed essay ‘The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious’ along with a brief summary of it. Moreover the key concerns of the essay are also evaluated for a better understanding of the text.
1.7 Keywords

1 The mirror stage: The stage in the growth of an infant when he is able to recognize himself in the mirror. The image reflected in the mirror is called by Lacan ‘the Ideal I’

1.8 Suggested Readings

(i) J.A. Cuddon: *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*.

(ii) Terry Eagleton: *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.

(iii) Patricia Waugh: *Literary Theory and Criticism*.


Possible Answers to Check Your Progress

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<td>(iv) True.</td>
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<td>(v) False.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Condensation is a term of Freudian psychology. It means an object or dream which stands for multiple objects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Displacement is a Freudian term. It means when an idea or emotion is displaced or transferred to anxiety in the unconscious.</td>
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4. Lacan sees the letter as a material support to concretize subjects.

References


Model Questions

1. Write a note on Psychoanalytic criticism with special reference to the insights of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.


3. Discuss how Jacques Lacan re-reads Freud in terms of his ideas of the unconscious. Give a reasoned answer.