

Binghamton University

Department of Comparative Literature

COLI 211B-04 –Literature and Psychology

Liebestod: Philosophy of Transgression

Fall 2009

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Class Meeting Timings: MWF, 10:50 – 11:50 am, FA 245

Office Hours: Mondays, 12:30 – 2:30 pm, and also by appointment

Office: LT 1509A

Course Description:

Psychoanalysis, says Lacan, begins and ends with the Death Drive. Nothing else is worthy of being conceived, discussed, adumbrated, except this pulse-throbbing, heart-renting, mystifying reality which can anything but be conceived, discussed, adumbrated in any possible way. Such is the impasse of all discourse, of Logos, of silence. Universal as the trope of death may be in literature, any portrayal of the “death drive” falters upon itself, not least because of the limited nature of representability, but due to the extreme hesitation practiced by the analyst in broaching this all-too-disconcerting subject, which has hitherto remained ambiguously defined.

The course attempts to lay down the fundamentals in the study of this elusive concept. We shall at best endeavor to acquaint ourselves with the experience of the Drive within the much variegated experience of poets and novelists who have brazenly dared to contend with the issue, within their lexical circumlocutions. How to pinpoint something so amorphous and minatory? What possibilities open up when we approach towards it? The juncture between the Death Drive and Art stands as the barrier to jouissance, that ultimate state of rapture without end, which is the enabling condition of the Drive as the simultaneous point of germination and sustenance of all creation. As such, all works of mourning are stipulated by a demand to return to a prior state of nothing, by a force of decimation and pulverization which engenders mourning itself. It is this pinnacle of pleasure which is the plague of the analyst.

We consider the medieval notion of “Liebestod” as a viable device to reify our quandary. The motif of Love in its corporeal states, kissing, embracing, copulating, and metaphysical resonances as planning, sketching, designing, dreaming, interpreting and appreciating, shall be rigorously investigated in terms of desire as the will to consummate via a conjugation with Death. However simplistic the relationality may seem, it is complicated by the idea of “transgression”, which is central to all aesthetic and analytical considerations. What happens when the barrier no longer withstands? Can we bear to face the consequences?

I. Introduction to the Death Drive

- A. Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (3)¹
- B. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (2)
- C. Siegfried Sassoon, “The Kiss” – to be compared with “Enola Gay”, composer, Andy McCluskey, performers, O.M.D. (1)
- D. Dylan Thomas, “Then was my Neophyte”; “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London” (2)

II. Whither Sublimation?

- A. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [as abridged in *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Stephen David Ross](2)
- B. Nestor A. Braunstein, “Desire and jouissance in the teachings of Lacan”, *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (1)
- C. Thomas Bernhard, *Correction* (3)
- D. [Supplementary Reading: Gitta Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian* – to be perused at your own interest]

III. Eros and Transgression

- A. Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros* (2)
- B. Michel Foucault, “Preface to Transgression”, *Language, Counter-memory and Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (2)
- C. Klaus Albrecht Schröder, *Egon Schiele: Eros and Passion* (3)

IV. Transgressing Transgression

- A. Hermann Broch, *Death of Virgil* (5)

¹ The parentheses indicate the number of sessions to be spent on the specified reading. See Class Calendar for details regarding page numbers for reading assignments.

V. The Last Vestige of Oedipus

- A. Herman Melville, *Pierre; or The Ambiguities* (5)

VI. Towards a Conception of Feminine Desire

- A. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs* (3)
B. Sophocles, *Antigone* (3)
C. Cecilia Sjöholm, *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire* (2)

Where to Find Course Material:

-On blackboard.binghamton.edu: Sassoon, Kant, Braunstein, Foucault

- Books to be purchased: Freud, Laplanche, Thomas, Bernhard, Bataille, Schroder, Broch, Melville, Sacher-Masoch, Sophocles, Sjöholm.

- Available online: Honegger [supplementary]

-The following book is ALSO on library reserve to be issued for one day: Bernhard

Course Objectives:

By the end of the course, students should have hopefully

- Learnt to enunciate the basic principles of Freudian psychoanalysis
- Developed a keen sensitivity towards literary symbols and poetic language, as deployed in various textual contexts
- Developed acute and avid reading habits, which both magnify textual intricacies and locate their microcosmic reference within literature
- Developed writing and editorial skills to express sophisticated theoretical arguments
- Broadened their horizons through a comparative analysis of art, literature (both in its primary language and translation), and critical theory.

Grading:

Students are required to write two term papers, the first of which must be between 1500 to 2000 words (around 7 double-spaced pages), to be submitted in class on **Oct 16, 2009**, and the second paper to be no less than 3000 words (around 12 double-spaced pages), to be handed in on **Nov 30, 2009**. NO

DEADLINE EXTENSIONS WILL BE GIVEN. Students shall have to tailor their response specifically to the query posed. Papers must follow the MLA style of referencing. Failure to do so shall result in grade depreciation. Also, please be aware that only the finished paper shall be graded. NO DRAFTS SHALL BE ENTERTAINED. All prescriptions to re-write shall be the prerogative of the instructor.

Paper 1: 30%

Paper 2: 50%

Class Participation: 20%

Students are highly encouraged to participate in class discussions. MORE THAN 3 ABSENCES SHALL RESULT IN THE LOWERING OF LETTER GRADE.

Texting and cell-phone use in class is not allowed. You do that at the risk of SUBSTANTIAL GRADE LOSS.

Grading Criteria for Term Papers:

A Grade:

- strong, independent thesis with coherent, well-argued exploration of issues taken as problematic and defying simplistic rationale. Argument takes a meticulous and well-nuanced approach in reifying text, utilizing variety of critical material from books, journals and articles of credible academic standing, to supplement, refute or synthesize the central stance of the paper.
- lucid presentation, i.e. systemic organization of arguments, so that the meaning is at once graspable.
- mature diction with negligible grammatical and spelling errors
- consistent referencing

B Grade:

- thesis lacks rigor and direction, hesitant to commit to a particular notion; scattered or loosely arranged arguments; at points self-contradictory, failing to penetrate the surface of things; digressive, vague and repetitive, but the overall effect of the argument remains undisturbed and sufficiently workable
- minor errors in paragraph and sentence structuring
- mediocre referencing, i.e. with slips here and there

C Grade:

- failure to engage with the argument; glossy, simplistic contentions; frequent theoretical and textual misconceptions; failure to support arguments with direct textual reference so that the central theme is never clear and hence does not emerge
- frequent errors of grammar and syntax
- argument wholly lacks structure producing confusions and contradictions
- slipshod referencing; hasty, inadequate research

D Grade:

- the text wholly lacks any attempt to produce a thesis or to engage in decent, scholastic argumentation
- paper riddled with mistakes of grammar; non-existent structuring
- presentation shows lack of concern and interest in course material

F Grade:

- paper(s) not presented
- plagiarism
- disrupting instructorship decorum with repeated, baseless provocation

Unfortunately, we shall not have the time to revise the basic skills of academic paper writing, or issues of grammar and referencing in class. For stylistic help please refer to *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. For referencing, please see the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

Important Disclaimer:

Course material included in this syllabus may appear offensive to certain individuals. This comprises certain graphic imagery of adult nature. It shall be assumed that upon enrollment students endorse course content and view it with an intellectually open-minded spirit.

Class Calendar:

Aug 31: Introduction

Sep 2: Sassoon, record listening: O.M.D.

Sep 4: Freud – Chapters 1, 2.

Sep 7: LABOR DAY – no class

Sep 9: Freud – Chapters 3, 4.

Sep 11: Freud – Chapters 5, 6, 7.

Sep 14: Laplanche pp. 103-126

Sep 16: Laplanche (discussion continued)

Sep 18: Thomas – Then Was My Neophyte

Sep 23: Thomas – A Refusal to Mourn

Sep 25: Kant

Sep 28: YOM KIPPUR - no class

Sep 30: Kant (discussion continued)

Oct 2: Braunstein

Oct 5: Bernhard – approx. first half of novel

Oct 7: Bernhard – approx. second half of novel

Oct 9: Bernhard (discussion continued)

Oct 12: Bataille

Oct 14: Bataille (discussion continued)

Oct 16: Foucault - **First Paper due**

Oct 19: Foucault (discussion continued)

Oct 21: Schröder pp. 7-63.

Oct 23: Schröder pp. 64-116.

Oct 26: Schröder (discussion continued)

Oct 28: Broch – First Movement

Oct 30: Broch – Second Movement

Nov 2: Broch – Third Movement

Nov 4: Broch – Fourth Movement

Nov 6: Broch (discussion continued)

Nov 9: Melville – Books 1-5

Nov 11: Melville – Books 6-10

Nov 13: Melville – Books 11-17

Nov 16: Melville – Books 18-22

Nov 18: Melville – Books 23-26

Nov 20: Sacher-Masoch – approx. first half of novel

Nov 23: Sacher-Masoch – approx. second half of novel

Nov 25: Sacher-Masoch (discussion continued)

Nov 27: THANKSGIVING BREAK – no class

Nov 30: Sophocles – **Second Paper due**

Dec 2: Sophocles

Dec 4: Sophocles

Dec 7: Sjöholm pp. 82-110

Dec 9: Sjöholm (discussion continued)

Dec 11: Conclusion