

Literary Criticism

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Key Terms

Criticism, Interpretation, Hermeneutics

- ★ Criticism is the act analyzing, evaluating, and judging the quality of a literary or artistic work.
- ★ Interpretation is explanation, explication, elucidation.
 - ★ Interpretation is the act of finding meaning in a work of art or literature.
- ★ Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, originally the Bible, but now broadly defined to art and literature.
 - ★ Hermeneutics is interpretive theory.

Key Terms

Theory

- ★ “A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena” (*Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*)
- ★ A proposed explanation
- ★ A system of rules, principles, and methods of art, as distinguished from practice
- ★ Theory is the act of contemplating disciplinary systems methodologically.

Literary Criticism vs Literary Theory

- ★ Literary criticism is a particular act of interpretation of a text.
 - ★ Literary criticism explains the text.
- ★ Literary theory is a hermeneutical method that proposes principles of textual analysis.
 - ★ Literary theory is *the* system that underpins a particular practice of criticism; literary theory systematizes literary criticism.

Critical Theory

- ★ Critical theory, as opposed to specifically literary theory, embodies the methodological analysis of culture in general. Literary analysis is one component of a larger analysis of media, politics and ideology, socio-economic positions, and other subjectifying apparatuses.
- ★ Because the theories we're learning about can be applied across disciplines (not just interpreting literature), I will refer to them as types of critical theory.

What We Will NOT Cover

English 3900 Spring 2010 Review

- ★ New Criticism (and Formalism), close reading of the text itself, paying particular heed to its unifying tensions and analysis of internal form.
- ★ Structuralism (and Semiotics and Narratology), the analysis of signs and codes within linguistic systems
- ★ Post-Structuralism (and Deconstruction and Post-Modernism), the analysis of a text's plays, slippages, and aporias of meaning

What We Will NOT Cover

English 3900 Review, continued

- ★ **Marxism (and Cultural Studies), socio-economic historical and cultural analyses**
- ★ **Feminist Criticism and Gender Studies, the analysis of the subject positions of women and gender within texts as well as the status of women authors within the canon**
- ★ **New Historicism, the interplay between literature and history writing**

What We Will NOT Cover

English 3900 Review, concluded

- ★ Postcolonialism, analyses of colonial ideology (oppression and othering) and postcolonial resistance
- ★ Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Theory, analyses of the politics and poetics, consciousness and unconsciousness of (queer) sexuality and identity
- ★ African American Criticism, analyses of African American (literary/aesthetic) history and heritage and the social construction of racial identity

What We Will Study

Psychoanalytic Criticism

- ★ Psychoanalytic Criticism analyzes the psyche of the author, text, and culture.
- ★ Overview: Tyson, “Psychoanalytic Criticism”
- ★ Theory: Vice, ed., *Psychoanalytic Criticism*
- ★ Practice: McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*
- ★ Practice: Ai, poems

What We Will Study

Existentialist and Phenomenological Criticism

- ★ Existentialist and Phenomenological Criticism examines the ontological status and worldly effects of literature
- ★ Overview: Solomon, Introduction to Existentialism
- ★ Overview: Dufrenne, “Existentialism and Existentialisms”
- ★ Theory: Solomon, ed., *Existentialism*
- ★ Practice: Sartre, *Nausea*
- ★ Practice: Rilke, poems

What We Will Study

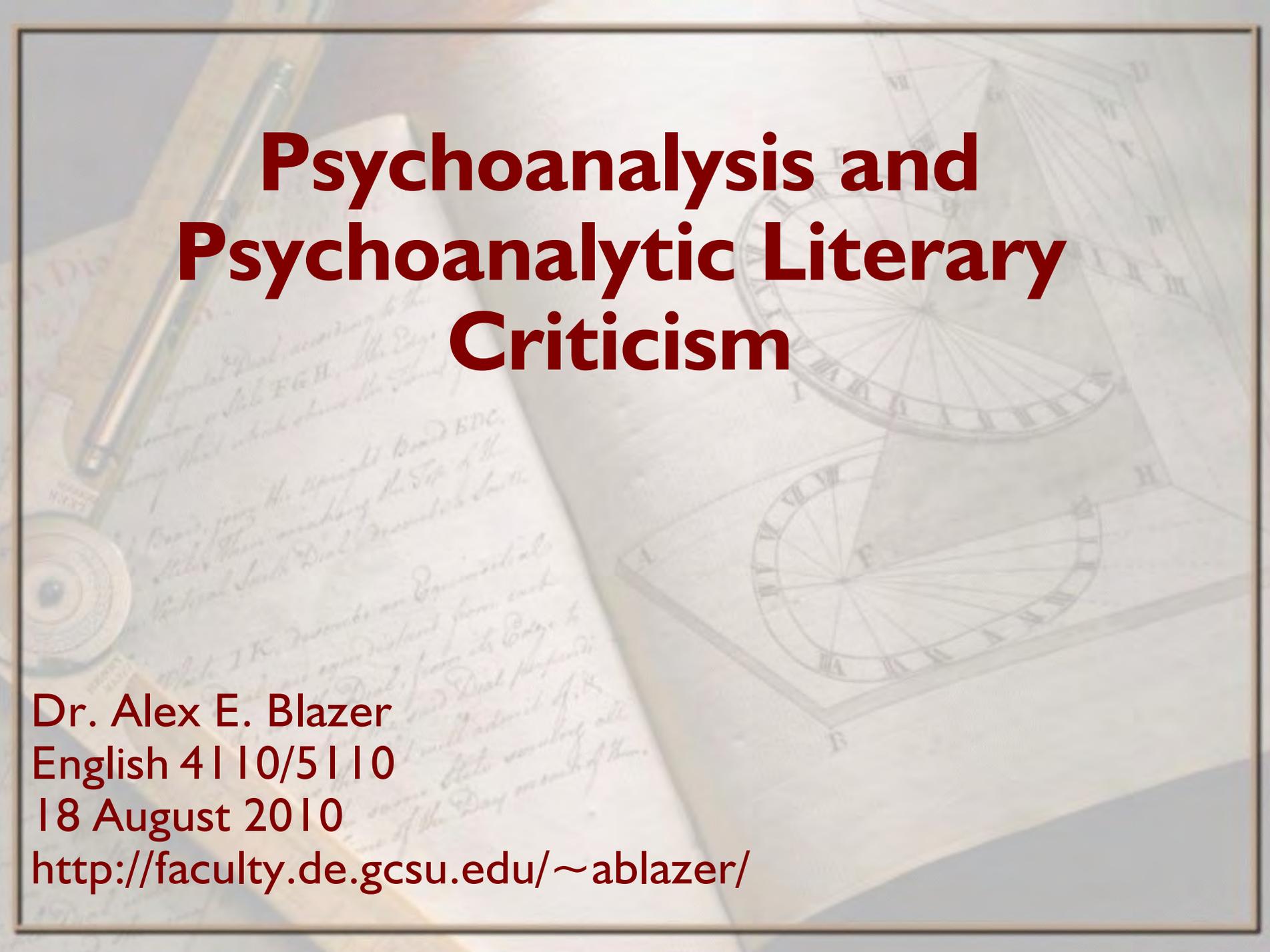
Reader-Response Criticism

- ★ Reader-Response Criticism interprets the triangular relationships between writers, texts, and readers.
- ★ Overview: Tyson, “Reader-Response Criticism”
- ★ Theory: Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism*
- ★ Practice: Davis, “Faulkner Summer”
- ★ Practice: Dahlen, poems

What We Will Study

Psycho-Existential Reader-Response Criticism

- ★ We will determine how the three interpretive methods overlap and combine to create a rigorous analysis of the psychological and existential experience of reading.
- ★ Practice: film (*Dark City*, *Donnie Darko*, *The Matrix*, *Mulholland Dr*, or *Vanilla Sky*) to be determined



Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

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Theory

Classical (Freudian) Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis, as inaugurated by Sigmund Freud, analyzes the psyche, which, according to the theory, is a site of irrational and unconscious conflict between primal desires and traumatic realities. The following slides represent the core of Freud's theory regarding models of psyche, unconscious and repression, pleasure and reality, sexuality, basic disorders, and symptom and cure.

Repression and the Unconscious

- ★ Two interrelated concepts underly all of Freud's work
 - ★ Repression: the procedure by which the conflicts and realities which the psyche cannot rationally deal with are put out of one's conscious, waking mind
 - ★ Unconscious: the part of the psyche into which conflicts and traumas are repressed

Two Models of Psyche

I. Id/Ego/Superego

- ★ Id (it): instinct or drive, the bodily and biological basis of all psychic processes
 - ★ Most id drives like sex are repressed; however, the id does not equal the unconscious.
- ★ Ego (I): the self, which originally develops out of the id, but is tested by reality and influenced by people in reality
 - ★ The ego manages the demands of 1) the libido and id, 2) external reality, and 3) super-ego.
 - ★ Overwhelmed by super-ego or reality, the ego represses prohibited drives or trauma.

I. Id/Ego/Super-ego

Concluded

★ Ego, continued

★ Anxiety and psychic unrest signal the breakdown of the ego's management of its various relations.

★ Super-ego (over-I): family and societal influences, voice of authority

★ The super-ego represents the ideal of higher humanity (you ought to be like this--like your father) and the reaction-formation against prohibition (you may not be like this--like your father).

★ Paradoxically, the super-ego's prohibitive idealism can give pleasure; thus the libido can become fused to its own negation, causing neurotic desire, for instance.

Two Models of Psyche

2. Unconscious/Pre-conscious/Conscious

- ★ Unconscious: the site of conflict and trauma, what one has repressed, what one cannot know without analytical help (It's not that one doesn't know she is obsessively washing her hands, but rather that she can't explain why)
- ★ Pre-conscious: what one is not thinking, but could if one chose to (short and long-term memory)
- ★ Conscious: what one is presently aware of

Pleasure and Reality

- ★ Pleasure principle: originally simply a tension derived from a unsatisfied drive of an erogenous zone, but as the psyche develops memory and fantasy, pleasure is coded into non-genital action of primary process, imagination, dreamwork, and wish-fulfillment
- ★ Reality principle: the secondary process thought of reason and judgment which rivals and supersedes the pleasure principle, thereby installing the unconscious of repressed desires

Pleasure and Reality

Continued

- ★ Eros vs Thanatos: undergirding the pleasure and reality principles, which exist in the order of the ego, are primal instincts, which exist in the irrational realm of the id.
- ★ Eros: the life instinct, pleasure derived from creation, love and affection
- ★ Thanatos: the death instinct, pleasure derived from (self-)destruction, hate and aggression

Pleasure and Reality

Concluded

- ★ Art: a reconciliation between pleasure and reality principles, a sublime working through of Eros and Thanatos.
- ★ Sublimation: the fulfillment of basic bodily drives via transformation into something “better,” civilized and artistic

Sexuality

- ★ Freud theorizes that humans pass through four stages of sexuality as they grow from infants to sexually active adults.
- ★ These stages seek to 1) localize desire from polymorphous perversity to genital pleasure and 2) transfer auto-erotic pleasure to others in the cause of heterosexual reproduction.
- ★ If a conflict or trauma in one of these stages is not resolved, then neurosis, psychosis, or perversity could result.

Sexuality

Continued

- ★ 1) oral, in which the mouth is the site of satisfaction,
- ★ 2) sadistic-anal, in which biting and excretion afford pleasure,
- ★ 3) phallic, in which the child undergoes the Oedipal complex of desire for the mother, rivalry with the father, and appropriate super-ego guilt taught through castration anxiety which causes the child to desire others outside the family; and the period of sexual latency which follows
 - ★ (Note: just because you don't remember your Oedipal complex doesn't mean it didn't happen. You were a toddler, and guilt veils or represses memory.)
- ★ 4) genital, green light for heterosexual reproduction

Three Basic Disorders

- ★ **Neurosis:** overwhelmed by reality and super-ego, the ego flees reality by suppressing id, desire, conflict, or trauma it cannot manage
- ★ **Psychosis:** with no support from the super-ego, the ego forecloses upon and remodels reality according to unchecked id, desire, conflict, or trauma
- ★ **Perversion:** due to a founding trauma which it disavows the reality of, the ego gives up real sexual pleasure for a symbolic substitute

Symptom and Cure

- ★ Everyone represses, but those for whom the unconscious causes debilitating suffering seek treatment with a psychoanalyst.
- ★ Symptom: manifest expression of unconscious conflict or trauma, a return of the repressed in somatic and agential form
- ★ Talking cure: the purpose of psychoanalysis is to reveal to the conscious mind through analytical discourse the unconscious underlying symptoms
- ★ Active Reversal: once an analysand realizes her unconscious conflicts, she can consciously seek to reverse them through new ways of being toward self, others, and the world

Theory

Lacanian Psychoanalysis

- ★ While Freud's key psychical topologies are unconscious/preconscious/conscious and id/ego/superego,
- ★ Jacques Lacan takes psychoanalysis into the realms of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real.

The Imaginary Order

- ★ The Imaginary, characterized by feelings of wholeness and fullness of being, is the realm of dyadic, unitary relation between child and mother inaugurated by
- ★ The Mirror Stage, that point in which the inchoate, impotent child looks at the mother, a caregiver, or a mirror and internalizes that image to give herself structure and control.

The Symbolic Order

- ★ The Symbolic Order, inaugurated by the father breaking the unitary bond of child and mother with language and substitution, with prohibition and the “No” (hence the No/Name-of-the-Father),
- ★ Causes the subject to lose her sense of complete being and thereby desire to fill the lack that initially split her not only from the mother but also from herself.

The Symbolic Order

Continued

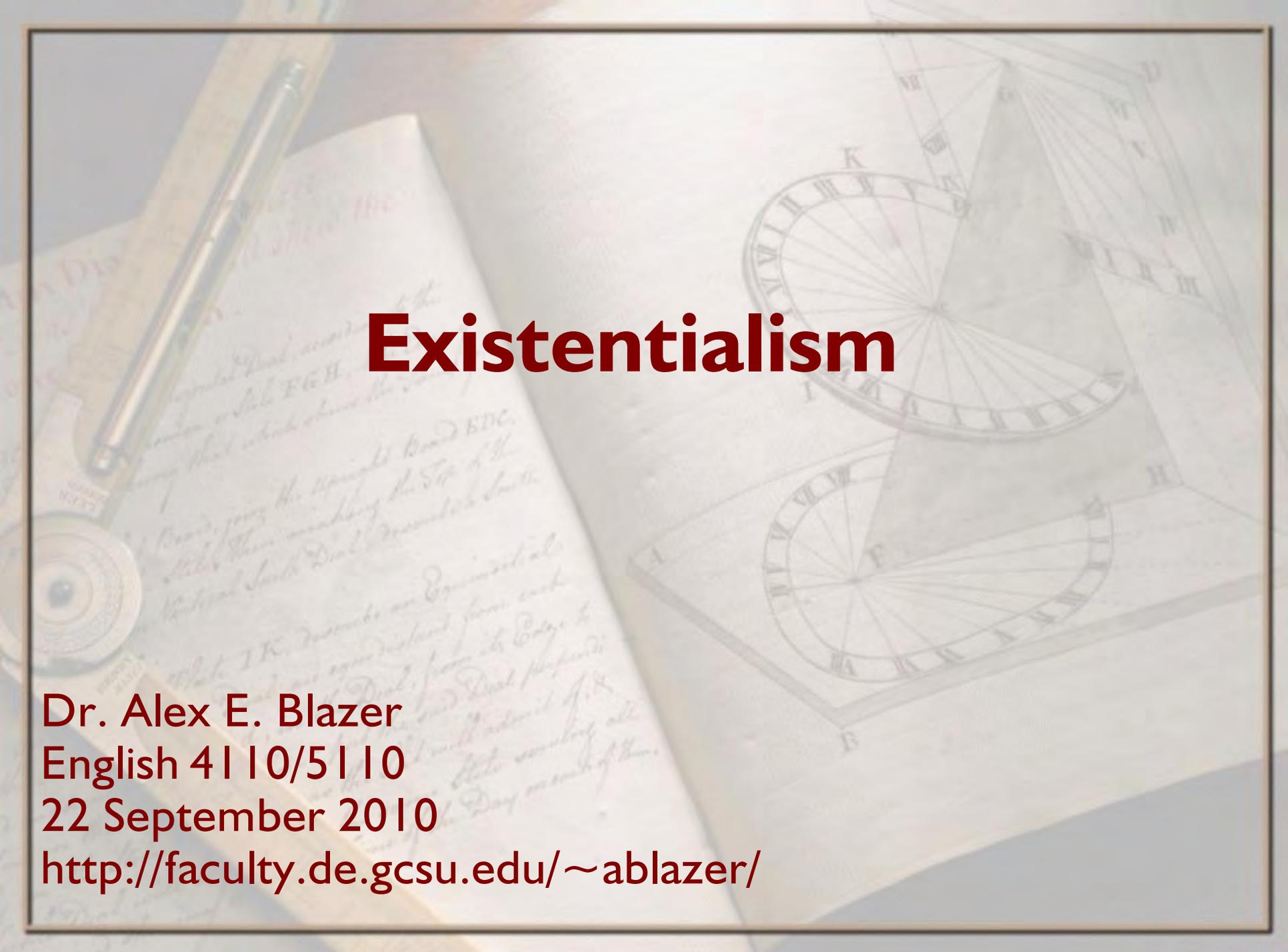
- ★ Desire is desire to fill the lack opened by symbolic substitution, of using language.
- ★ The *objet petit a* is the lost object of desire that forms the subject's unconscious and motivates her unconscious actions, her drive to be whole.
- ★ While the Imaginary is characterized by unitary being, the Symbolic is comprised of the rules of meaning designed to satisfy the desire of the Big Other.

The Real

★ When the subject realizes that Symbolic meaning is an illusion covering a basic lack of Imaginary being, she encounters the traumatic, impossible, incomprehensible Real that exists beyond symbolization, that bores a hole in the Symbolic, that leaves her destitute and bereft, desubjectivized yet finally free to be driven to jouissance, real enjoyment.

Practice

- ★ Whereas classical criticism defines and defends literature's place in society and culture,
- ★ Psychoanalytic literary criticism looks at the psyche and psychological anxieties and issues of a literary text's
 - ★ Characters
 - ★ Author or Culture
 - ★ Reader or Society



Existentialism

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Theory

From Psychoanalysis to Existentialism

Psychoanalysis is a theory of how the psyche is split between consciousness and unconsciousness; between id, ego, and superego; between the semiotic and the symbolic; between the realms of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on how the self is split from itself in self-consciousness as well as how the self relates to the world.

Philosophy 101

Five Branches of Philosophy

- ★ *metaphysics*: Asks what is nature of things
 - ★ *ontology*: study of being and existence
- ★ *epistemology*: Theory of knowledge; asks what is it to know or believe something
- ★ *aesthetics*: Philosophy of the arts
- ★ *logic*: Principles of reasoning
- ★ *ethical theory*: Asks what we should do and what behavior is right

Existential Philosophy

★ Existentialism combines ontology, epistemology, and ethics by asking how one should act self-consciously knowing she exists in a world with no essential meaning.

Being

Existence and Essence

- ★ While much of Western philosophy believed that metaphysical, ontological being was absolute essential, and unchanging in nature such that basic essence was a first principle that affected real life existence, Sartre revolutionized and reversed that concept with his statement “existence precedes essence.”
- ★ In other words, according to existentialism, one first chooses how to exist, live, and act in the world before her essence can be defined. Since we are always existing, our essence is always

In-Itself and For-Itself

- ★ Sartre further differentiated between “the in-itself, the opaque and inert being whose essence implies existence, and the for-itself, the transparent being of consciousness, whose existence posits the essence” (Dufrenne 52).
- ★ In other words, the in-itself is a thing full of being while the for-itself is a self consciously and willfully coming into being.

Self-Consciousness

- ★ While psychoanalysis distinguishes between what one is aware of and what desires and traumas one has repressed, existentialism differentiates between consciousness and self-consciousness, between consciousness and consciousness that reflects on the very nature of self, world, and the relationship between self and world.
- ★ While psychoanalysis strives to uncover the unconscious, existentialism constitutes a quest of self-discovery, of one's being-in-the-world.

Freedom and Action

- ★ Because we have no essential nature according to existentialism, human beings are burdened with an absolute freedom of choice.
- ★ We must exist, and yet we must define the terms and bases of our actions, our lives.
- ★ The essential existential questions become: “What have I done? Who have I been?” (Solomon xv) and “Who am I? What should I do?”
- ★ How should I be in the world?

Meaning

- ★ Just as human beings have no essential nature, the world has no fundamental meaning.
- ★ There is no fate, no authority beyond self-consciousness.
- ★ Just as human beings are forced to be free in a world where all values are suspect, we are also necessarily burdened with making meaning: who and what is or ought to be meaningful in this world?

Literary Criticism

From Psychoanalytic to Existentialist Criticism

- ★ While psychoanalytic literary criticism looks at the psyche of characters, the author and her culture, and the reader and her society, existentialist literary criticism examines the self-conscious subjectivity and free choice of characters in the (fictive) world, creative writing as meaningful action, and the being of the literary work and consciousness in the world.

Reader-Response Criticism

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Theory

From Psychoanalytic Criticism
and Existentialist Criticism
To Reader-Response Criticism

★ While *psychoanalytic criticism* and *existentialist criticism* are interpretive theories of literature based on a social science and a philosophy, respectively, *reader-response criticism* is a literary theory based on the reading experience itself.

Theory

From Psychoanalytic Criticism And Existentialist Criticism

- ★ While *psychoanalytic criticism* looks at the psyche of characters, the author and her culture, and the reader and her society, and
- ★ While *existentialist criticism* examines the self-conscious subjectivity and free choice of characters in the (fictive) world, creative writing as meaningful action, and the being of the literary work and consciousness in the world, . . .

Theory

To Reader-Response Criticism

★ *Reader-Response criticism* examines the experience of reading, reading as meaning-making process, and the relationship between reader and text.

Transactional Reader-Response Theory

- ★ Transactional Reader-Response theory analyzes the meaning-making transaction between the printed text and the reader that produces the literary work. The text itself guides and determines the reading process. When there are gaps in the text, meaning is indeterminate (unclear or multiplicitous) and the reader must create her own interpretation.

Affective Stylistics

★Affective Stylistics uses line-by-line close reading to analyze how the text affects the reader in the process of meaning. Meaning is what the text does to the reader.

Subjective Reader-Response Theory

- ★ Subjective Reader-Response theory looks at how the emotional and intellectual experience of reading the text produces a conceptual, symbolic literary work in the reader's mind. Interpretation explains and judges the reader's symbolic work, not the text itself because there is no literary work beyond readers' responses.

Psychological Reader-Response Theory

★ Psychological Reader-Response theory interprets what readers' interpretations reveal about themselves, about their unconscious fears and desires, not about the text. As such, this version of reader-response overlaps with psychoanalytical criticism that focuses on readers.

Social Reader-Response Theory

★ Social Reader-Response theory examines interpretive communities, groups of people (like a class or a book-club) who share methods for interpreting texts. The individual act of interpretation is based on the values and questions the reader has learned from her interpretive community.

Combining Theories

Psycho-Existential Reader-Response Criticism

- ★ Psycho-Existential Reader-Response Criticism examines the interactive and transformative encounters among the unconscious psyches of the author, the text, and the reader.
- ★ The act of interpretation explores how the reading experience brings the individual and cultural unconscious into self-consciousness that can change how one acts towards others and lives in the world.