

ESTHER RASHKIN

# Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative



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**FAMILY SECRETS  
AND THE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE**

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# FAMILY SECRETS

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## AND THE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE

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*Esther Rashkin*

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**In memory of my mother**

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*Rien ne pèse tant qu'un secret .*  
(La Fontaine)



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## Acknowledgments

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PARTS of this book have appeared, in altered form, in essays published elsewhere. A slightly different version of chapter 1 appeared as "Tools for a New Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: The works of Abraham and Torok," in *Diacritics* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1988). A very different version of chapter 3 was first published as "Secret Crimes, Haunted Signs: Villiers's *L'Intersigne*," in *The Stanford French Review* (published by Anna Libri) 6, no. 1 (Spring 1982) and was revised for publication as "Le signe enterré dans *L'Intersigne* de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam," in *Cahiers Confrontation*, no. 18 (Fall 1987). It was further revised for inclusion here. Chapter 4 first appeared as "Signes cryptés, rimes dorées: *Facino Cane* de Balzac," in *Cahiers Confrontation*, no. 8 (Fall 1982); it was significantly altered and published as "Phantom Legacies: Balzac's *Facino Cane*," in *Romanic Review* 80, no. 4 (November 1989). Copyright by the Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. Chapter 5 was first published as "A Spectacle of Haunting: James's *The Jolly Corner*," in *The Oxford Literary Review* 12, nos. 1-2 (1990). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint.

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## Note on Documentation

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For the reader's convenience, page references to primary texts in each chapter appear throughout in parentheses following quotations. All italics and translations are my own, unless stated otherwise. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, cited as *OED*, and *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, 2d edition (1985), hereafter cited as *Robert*, are used to confirm the common usage of a word at the time it was employed in a text and are most frequently cited because they provide dates and examples of usage for references. Also used for corroboration is *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d edition, unabridged (1949), cited as *Webster's*. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1985), *The Collins English Dictionary*, 2d edition (1986), and the *Larousse de la langue française* (1979) have also been used to confirm word usage, although they are not cited. All references to Freud's works are cited, by volume and page number, from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955).



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## Introduction

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### Character Analysis, Unspeakable Secrets, and the Formation of Narrative

THIS BOOK is a study of the haunting effects of family secrets on characters in narrative. It grew out of an interest in the psychoanalytic study of fictional personae in works of literature. Over the years, the field of character analysis has entertained a variety of theories and methodologies that have been invented and applied to texts in order to account for the actions and speech of their protagonists. The analytic approach I delineate and whose implications I explore in this book is markedly different from these previous perspectives and is even more at odds with recent attempts to bracket or debunk such undertakings. It has nevertheless been informed to some degree by all the principal critical stances toward interpreting characters in narrative. It is thus indebted to the debate and innovation that have preceded it just as it aims to contribute a new line of inquiry, both theoretical and methodological, to character analysis and to psychoanalytic literary criticism in general.

Historically, psychoanalytic critics have sought to describe the dynamics of repression and thereby explain the underlying signification of manifest elements in a text. Freudian approaches have often relied on the theory of the "return of the repressed" to interpret characters' expressions of love, hate, guilt, ambivalence, and fear as manifestations of buried or repressed conflicts between instinctual desires and societal prohibitions. Ego-psychology, object-relations theories, archetypal theory, and reader-response criticism have explored different models of psychic organization, shifting the emphasis from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal dynamics of development or from the manifestations and vicissitudes of infantile desire to the formation and maintenance of identity, self, societal norms and classifications, or the reader's own fantasies.<sup>1</sup> Despite their widely divergent theoretical underpinnings and practical applications, these reading approaches all pay heed to an array of rhetorical and grammatical mechanisms by which signification, interpersonal relationships, and societal codes are disguised, camouflaged, transformed, and displaced in and through a text. A large part of my research has been devoted to the related but somewhat different problem of assessing the precise manner in which such

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rhetorical and grammatical mechanisms resist understanding and to finding ways of surmounting the obstacles they pose to interpretation.

In the course of doing so, I have encountered rhetorical modes of hiding and concealment previously unknown to literary analysis. *Symbol* and *cryptonymy* are two such modes discovered by the French psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who explored their significance for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis and for the elaboration of certain philosophical and aesthetic concepts. Abraham and Torok's writings, especially their discussion of *secrets*, have had an important impact on my examination of the problems of character motivation, textuality, and the formation of narratives in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature.

This study is concerned with setting forth a new approach to analyzing certain literary works organized by the inscription within them of a particular kind of secret. It does not treat secrets in the sense of pieces of information or gossip passed on confidentially from one person to another to the exclusion of a third. Nor does it concern an act or event involving one or more persons that is kept from everyone else or willfully covered up. My interest, in short, is not with secrets explicitly identified as such, as one finds in *The Scarlet Letter*, *Benito Cereno*, and *What Maisie Knew*. By "secret" I mean a situation or drama that is transmitted without being stated and without the sender's or receiver's awareness of its transmission.

This is clearly distinct from the kinds of secrets parents regularly keep from their children (minor medical problems, sexual habits, or the contents of a will, for example) to preserve their privacy or keep peace in a family. At stake here is an interpersonal drama, experienced as too shameful to be articulated, which must be kept silent. The reasons for which it is shameful are not always revealed by the text. Neither can it be assumed that overwhelming shame is innately present in or automatically attached to any particular event or experience. Secrets of illegitimacy, a parent's imprisonment, a suicide, or a sexual molestation can be and frequently are brought out in the open where their psychic charge may be reduced and ultimately dissipated. While these dramas may still evoke feelings of shame or embarrassment once revealed, such effects are quite distinct from the psychic turmoil produced in both the sender and the receiver when these and similarly charged secrets are kept concealed by the former and then tacitly passed on to the latter.<sup>2</sup>

The configuration in which a shameful, unspeakable secret is silently transmitted to someone else in whom it lodges is called a *phantom*. It was discovered by Nicolas Abraham in response to certain patients encountered in his clinical practice and was elaborated upon in his and

Maria Torok's writings on the metapsychology of secrets. One of my book's aims is to explore the theoretical and interpretive implications this configuration holds for the study of narrative literature. In conjunction with this endeavor my analyses depart significantly from Abraham and Torok's quite logical clinical emphasis on identifying phantoms as sources of psychopathology potentially susceptible to therapeutic treatment. My focus is instead on examining how phantoms can be concealed rhetorically and linguistically within literature, how their concealed presence can be detected and exposed as the driving force behind the actions and discourse of certain fictive characters, and how the analysis of the modes and processes of their concealment makes possible the articulation of a new approach to literary character analysis and a new theory of narrative generation.

My project thus directly engages the debate concerning the relationship between literary analysis and psychoanalysis. Literary analysis, as it will emerge from this study, is interested in identifying and reading the traces or effects of a drama that has been inscribed in a narrative but is not readily visible within it. From a methodological point of view this means that the linguistic elements of the text are considered to be incomplete and need to be joined with their missing complements, whose traces are embedded in the text. This union of complements enables the reader to perceive or conjecture a concealed drama in the family history of the character that occurred, in most cases, prior to the events of the narrative. The result of this approach is a reconsideration of extant conceptions of narrative limits and textual boundaries and a rethinking of the notion of textual origins.

This inquiry also engages the long-standing debate concerning the legitimacy of analyzing the behavior and motivation of fictional characters. My training in the close reading of literary works and my interest in exposing textual complexity and interpreting the enigmas posed by various narratives have drawn me to explore the divergent positions of this issue. It has become apparent to me that, despite their substantial theoretical and practical differences, all those who have addressed the question of character analysis—from partisans of New Criticism to those aligned with deconstruction, from orthodox Freudians to post-Freudian Lacanians—implicitly agree that literary texts worthy of interpretation have a level of complexity that is not readily apparent and that their visible elements are signs, semes, codes, signifiers, traces, or symptoms of something yet to be revealed. The thrust of my research for this book has been to identify visible elements of selected narratives as symptoms or "symbols" that point to unspeakable family dramas cryptically inscribed within them. In the process of reconstituting these dramas from their textual traces, I show how

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the motivating forces behind the puzzling, seemingly incongruous behavior and speech of the characters in these narratives can be determined, and how the generative force of the narratives themselves can be revealed.

Structuralism, represented by critics such as Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Vladimir Propp, and A. J. Greimas, has largely rejected the legitimacy of character analysis, stressing instead the systems of codes, conventions, and signs that traverse characters and define the roles or functions they assume. As Jonathan Culler has noted, structuralism considers the conception of characters as "richly delineated autonomous wholes, clearly distinguished from others by physical and psychological characteristics . . . , a myth."<sup>3</sup> Although my work is at odds with this view and with structuralism's dependence on underlying formal systems of oppositions for evaluating a text's conformity to predetermined literary expectations, conventions, and modes of organization, it shares structuralism's larger interest in textual tension and ambiguity and in the possibility of locating principles of coherence that might account for these effects.

While deconstructive criticism has tended to dismantle the notion of the fictive character into what Peter Brooks calls "an effect of textual codes, a kind of thematic mirage,"<sup>4</sup> my approach to character analysis shares deconstruction's concern with pushing aside the apparent meaning of the text and unveiling the rhetorical strategies by which that meaning is undermined or deferred. It branches off from deconstruction's concentration on elaborating how signification is rendered undecidable or unavailable in a text by focusing on *why* signification has been made unavailable. This entails showing how the processes by which coherence is obstructed can themselves be interpreted in certain texts to reveal unspeakable dramas concealed within the narratives.

Lacanian interpretations of literature have by and large transmuted the question of character analysis into an analysis of the subject as an effect of language or of the signifier. The Lacanian emphasis on the relationship between psychoanalysis and language, on the production of signifying chains, and on the rhetorical mechanisms by which language distorts, condenses, and displaces meaning are pertinent for any psychoanalytic literary critic. My tracing of the incongruous behavior of characters in texts to concealed family dramas, however, hinges on a view of the subject's relationship to the signifier different from Lacan's. The elaboration of the mechanisms by which these dramas are concealed also diverges from Lacanian modes of analysis, since these mechanisms reach beyond the scope of known rhetorical strategies based on distortion, condensation, and displacement and offer an alternative to the preeminence of metaphor and metonymy in Lacanian theory. One of the major implications of this inquiry is to question the

legitimacy of relying on the infinitude of the signifying chain and on the primacy of the phallus in the formation of the subject as heuristic principles.

A primary argument forwarded by those disagreeing with the appropriateness of analyzing characters in literature has been the impossibility of reconstructing a character's past when it is not explicitly present in the text. Meredith Skura, for one, has argued that retracing a hidden past is solely the domain of clinical psychoanalysis which, in treating the human mind, deals with experiences "less coherently organized and less comprehensible than even the most horrible and irrational passions in any poetic schema. . . . The analyst," she contends, "always deals with more of the mind than does either the poet or the theoretician. . . . Like the poet, the analyst asks about a character's unacknowledged motives; but unlike the poet, he traces these back to other thoughts, other experiences, other contexts, which gave rise to motives and give them their only meaning. What is unique about psychoanalysis is that it not simply identifies strange behavior but also locates a source for behavior in something besides current experience. . . . [T]he characters [in Shakespeare's plays] have objective correlates for their behavior. The play's world explains . . . what the characters do. . . . The explanation lies in the context, not in some additional unseen shaper of the will, and certainly not in offstage, never-mentioned past events."<sup>5</sup>

Readers themselves can decide whether, in light of my analyses, the characters depicted by Joseph Conrad, Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Honoré de Balzac, Henry James, and Edgar Allan Poe are more coherently organized, comprehensible and rational than human patients encountered and described by clinical psychoanalysis.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the objection to seeking the cause of a fictive character's behavior in unseen, never-mentioned past events can be addressed at this juncture because it is, I think, based on a fallacious assumption. It presumes that talking about a fictive character's past means treating that character as human and his or her past as "real." If this were my project such an objection would be justified. My enterprise, however, is different. The past dramas I reconstruct from short stories and to which I trace characters' behavior have the same fictional status as the characters themselves. Both the "life" of the character as it is presented in the text and the past I conjecture are fictive, which is not to say fictitious. The familial dramas that can be reconstituted as motive forces in each story are not without textual basis but are inscribed and readable in the narrative. It is thus not a question of inventing a false, fantasized past for a character but of understanding that the text, in each instance, calls upon the reader to expand its apparent parameters to include scenarios that are rhetorically, semantically, phonemically, crypto-

## 8 INTRODUCTION

nymically, and symbolically inscribed within it. These dramas, while predating the events of the text, have no reality outside the limits of the text. Such limits, however, have to be construed as extending beyond their readily visible borders. The task of the reader is to redraw these boundaries, which, we will see, are not static but move constantly outward.

Shoshana Felman has addressed the question of the text's limits and the problematic relationship between literature and psychoanalysis in her introduction to *Literature and Psychoanalysis—The Question of Reading: Otherwise*.<sup>7</sup> In a now-classic argument, Felman states succinctly and eloquently that the traditional hierarchy in which psychoanalysis is presumed to have mastery and explanatory power over literature elides the specificity of literature. She proposes that the task of the literary critic is "to engage in a real *dialogue* between literature and psychoanalysis, as between two different bodies of language and between two different modes of knowledge."<sup>8</sup> She goes on to argue that the way to discover what literature might have to teach us about psychoanalysis is to view the relationship of the two in terms of mutual implication rather than of one-sided application.

While the questions she and I pose in analyzing a text are somewhat different, Felman's emphasis on the need to avoid the application of psychoanalysis to literature is in my view indisputable. Her contention that literature has a great deal to teach us about psychoanalysis and that it is essential to establish and maintain an open exchange or dialogue between these two realms is equally valid. One goal of my book is to contribute to the ongoing and mutually beneficial dialogue between literature and psychoanalysis through an inquiry into the relationship between the transmission of family secrets, the analysis of fictional characters, and the generation of narrative. A specific result of this inquiry will be to shift the terms and implications of this dialogue from considering literature and psychoanalysis as two different bodies of language and two different modes of knowledge to viewing literary analysis and psychoanalysis as two different contexts for the same mode of interpretation. This shift will, in turn, open the way to articulating the heretofore unrecognized commentaries, tacitly offered by certain fictional texts, on the nature and workings of the psyche and on the relationship between psychic drama and the formation of literary narrative.

The study begins with a preliminary statement of my methodology and a comparative analysis of those metapsychological and interpretive theories of Freud, Lacan, and Abraham and Torok that have particular relevance for psychoanalytic literary criticism. Although interest in the writings of Abraham and Torok continues to grow, their