

Introductory Lecture

Literary theory

“Literary theory” is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature.

All literary interpretation draws on a basis in theory but can serve as a justification for very different kinds of critical activity. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of their thematic presence within texts. Literary theory offers varying approaches for understanding the role of historical context in interpretation as well as the relevance of linguistic and unconscious elements of the text. Literary theorists trace the history and evolution of the different genres— narrative, dramatic, lyric—in addition to the more recent emergence of the novel and the short story, while also investigating the importance of formal elements of literary structure. Lastly, literary theory in recent years has sought to explain the degree to which the text is more the product of a culture than an individual author and in turn how those texts help to create the culture.

What Is Literary Theory?

“Literary theory,” sometimes designated “critical theory,” or “theory,” and now undergoing a transformation into “cultural theory” within the discipline of literary studies, can be understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts. Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations.

All critical practice regarding literature depends on an underlying structure of ideas in at least two ways: theory provides a rationale for what constitutes the subject matter of criticism—“the literary”—and the specific aims of critical practice—the act of interpretation itself. For example, to speak of the “unity” of *Oedipus the King* explicitly invokes Aristotle’s theoretical statements on poetics.

To argue, as does Chinua Achebe, that Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* fails to grant full humanity to the Africans it depicts is a perspective informed by a postcolonial literary theory that presupposes a history of exploitation and racism. Critics that explain the climactic drowning of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* as a suicide generally call upon a supporting architecture of feminist and gender theory.

The structure of ideas that enables criticism of a literary work may or may not be acknowledged by the critic, and the status of literary theory within the academic discipline of literary studies continues to evolve. Literary theory and the formal practice of literary interpretation runs a parallel but less well known course with the history of philosophy and is evident in the historical record at least as far back as Plato. The *Cratylus* contains a Plato’s meditation on the relationship of words and the things

to which they refer. Plato's skepticism about signification, i.e., that words bear no etymological relationship to their meanings but are arbitrarily "imposed," becomes a central concern in the twentieth century to both "Structuralism" and "Poststructuralism."

However, a persistent belief in "reference," the notion that words and images refer to an objective reality, has provided epistemological (that is, having to do with theories of knowledge) support for theories of literary representation throughout most of Western history. Until the nineteenth century, Art, in Shakespeare's phrase, held "a mirror up to nature" and faithfully recorded an objectively real world independent of the observer. Modern literary theory gradually emerges in Europe during the nineteenth century. In one of the earliest developments of literary theory, German "higher criticism" subjected biblical texts to a radical historicizing that broke with traditional scriptural interpretation. "Higher," or "source criticism," analyzed biblical tales in light of comparable narratives from other cultures, an approach that anticipated some of the method and spirit of twentieth century theory, particularly "Structuralism" and "New Historicism."

In France, the eminent literary critic Charles Augustin Saint Beuve maintained that a work of literature could be explained entirely in terms of biography, while novelist Marcel Proust devoted his life to refuting Saint Beuve in a massive narrative in which he contended that the details of the life of the artist are utterly transformed in the work of art. (This dispute was taken up anew by the French theorist Roland Barthes in his famous declaration of the "Death of the Author." See "Structuralism" and "Poststructuralism.")

Perhaps the greatest nineteenth century influence on literary theory came from the deep epistemological suspicion of Friedrich Nietzsche: that facts are not facts until they have been interpreted. Nietzsche's critique of knowledge has had a profound impact on literary studies and helped usher in an era of intense literary theorizing that has yet to pass. Attention to the etymology of the term "theory," from the Greek "theoria," alerts us to the partial nature of theoretical approaches to literature. "Theoria" indicates a view or perspective of the Greek stage. This is precisely what literary theory offers, though specific theories often claim to present a complete system for understanding literature.

The current state of theory is such that there are many overlapping areas of influence, and older schools of theory, though no longer enjoying their previous eminence, continue to exert an influence on the whole. The once widely-held conviction (an implicit theory) that literature is a repository of all that is meaningful and ennobling in the human experience, a view championed by the Leavis School in Britain, may no longer be acknowledged by name but remains an essential justification for the current structure of American universities and liberal arts curricula.

The moment of "Deconstruction" may have passed, but its emphasis on the indeterminacy of signs (that we are unable to establish exclusively what a word means when used in a given situation) and thus of texts, remains significant. Many critics may not embrace the label "feminist," but the premise that gender is a social construct, one of theoretical feminisms distinguishing insights, is now axiomatic in a number of theoretical perspectives.

While literary theory has always implied or directly expressed a conception of the world outside the text, in the twentieth century three movements—“Marxist theory” of the Frankfurt School, “Feminism,” and “Postmodernism”—have opened the field of literary studies into a broader area of inquiry. Marxist approaches to literature require an understanding of the primary economic and social bases of culture since Marxist aesthetic theory sees the work of art as a product, directly or indirectly, of the base structure of society. Feminist thought and practice analyzes the production of literature and literary representation within the framework that includes all social and cultural formations as they pertain to the role of women in history. Postmodern thought consists of both aesthetic and epistemological strands.

Postmodernism in art has included a move toward non-referential, non-linear, abstract forms; a heightened degree of self-referentiality; and the collapse of categories and conventions that had traditionally governed art. Postmodern thought has led to the serious questioning of the so-called metanarratives of history, science, philosophy, and economic and sexual reproduction. Under postmodernity, all knowledge comes to be seen as “constructed” within historical self-contained systems of understanding. Marxist, feminist, and postmodern thought have brought about the incorporation of all human discourses (that is, interlocking fields of language and knowledge) as a subject matter for analysis by the literary theorist.

Using the various poststructuralist and postmodern theories that often draw on disciplines other than the literary—linguistic, anthropological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical—for their primary insights, literary theory has become an interdisciplinary body of cultural

theory. Taking as its premise that human societies and knowledge consist of texts in one form or another, cultural theory (for better or worse) is now applied to the varieties of texts, ambitiously undertaking to become the preeminent model of inquiry into the human condition.

Literary theory is a site of theories: some theories, like “Queer Theory,” are “in;” other literary theories, like “Deconstruction,” are “out” but continue to exert an influence on the field. “Traditional literary criticism,” “New Criticism,” and “Structuralism” are alike in that they held to the view that the study of literature has an objective body of knowledge under its scrutiny. The other schools of literary theory, to varying degrees, embrace a postmodern view of language and reality that calls into serious question the objective referent of literary studies. The following categories are certainly not exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive, but they represent the major trends in literary theory of this century..

Traditional Literary Criticism Academic literary criticism prior to the rise of “New Criticism” in the United States tended to practice traditional literary history: tracking influence, establishing the canon of major writers in the literary periods, and clarifying historical context and allusions within the text. Literary biography was and still is an important interpretive method in and out of the academy; versions of moral criticism, not unlike the Leavis School in Britain, and aesthetic (e.g. genre studies) criticism were also generally influential literary practices. Perhaps the key unifying feature of traditional literary criticism was the consensus within the academy as to the both the literary canon (that is, the books all educated persons should read) and the aims and purposes of literature. What literature was, and why we read literature, and what we

read, were questions that subsequent movements in literary theory were to raise.

Literary Criticism – The analysis of a literary text through various lenses that highlight authorial stance, purpose, and perspective

Part of the fun of reading good literature is looking for all its meanings and messages. Since people have written literature, critics have been interpreting it going all the way back to ancient Greece and Rome. For many centuries, literary criticism has been limited to some basic approaches involving historical, moral and biographical perspectives. But during the 20th century, critical approaches have become much more varied due to the huge increase of educated people and their widely diverse reactions to literature. As the meaning of what literature is and can be or should be has changed, so has the critics' responses to it.

Below are outlined for you six of the dozen-or-so “schools” of literary criticism currently deemed valid by the academic world. A critical viewpoint is simply a lens through which we look at a piece of literature, allowing this lens to shape our reaction to the work. These different schools are not exclusive – in fact, most critical essays use ideas from several types of criticism. But depending upon what work you are reading, and what your own ideas about what good literature should do, or your own ideas about life and the world, some critical methods will work better than others or be more helpful for your understanding of a work. The goal of literary criticism is always to help us understand and appreciate a work more fully, no matter what approach(es) we use.

Traditional Critical Approaches

1. **Historical-Biographical.** This approach sees a literary work as a reflection of the author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work. Critics using this school of thought investigate how plot details, settings, and characters of the work reflect or are representative of events, settings, and people in the author's life or a direct outgrowth of — or reaction to— the culture in which the author lived.
2. **Moral-Philosophical.** This approach takes the position that the larger function of literature is to teach morality and probe philosophical issues, such as ethics, religion, or the nature of humanity. Literature is interpreted within the context of the philosophical thought of a period or group, such as Christianity, Existentialism, Buddhism, etc. Often critics will see in the work allusions to other works, people, or events from this perspective, or see the work as allegorical.
3. **Formalistic Criticism.** Using this type of criticism, a reader would see the work as an independent and self-sufficient artistic object. This approach is also sometimes referred to as the “New Criticism,” since it came back in vogue in the 1960s-70s, but it was originally an outgrowth of the “Art for Art's Sake” movement of the late 1800s. Formalistic critics assume that everything necessary for analyzing the work is present in the work itself and disregard any connection to possible outside influences such as the author's own life or historical times. This criticism considers what a work says and how it says it as inseparable issues. It focuses on close reading, with sensitivity to the words and their various meanings. It searches for structures, patterns, imagery and motifs, and figurative language along with the juxtaposition of scenes, tone, and other literary techniques in order to come to conclusions about the meaning of the work.

Newer Approaches to Literary Criticism

1. **Psychological Criticism.** This approach deals with a work of literature primarily as it is an expression – in fictional form – of the author’s personality, mindset, feelings and desires. It also requires that we investigate the psychology of the characters and their motives in order to figure out the work’s meanings. This school of criticism got its start with the work of Sigmund Freud, which incorporated the importance of the unconscious or sub-conscious in human behavior. Some typical “archetypal” Freudian interpretations include: rebellion against a father, id versus superego, death-wish forces, or sexual repression. Dreams, visualizations, and fantasies of characters in modern works usually stem from Freudian concepts.
2. **Feminist / Gender Criticism.** This approach asks us to use a wide variety of issues related to gender, concerning the author, the work itself, the reader, and the societies of the author and reader, to determine the stance of the work on the feminist continuum. These critics would argue that in order to achieve validity, a literary criticism that claims universality must include the feminine consciousness, since till very recently and in many instances yet today, works of literature and criticism have been male-dominated and therefore necessarily skewed in their perspective. Feminist critics look for the development of male and female characters and their motives to see how the author and his or her times affected the gender roles in the work.
3. **Sociological / Marxist Criticism.** This viewpoint considers particular aspects of the political content of the text; the author; the historical and socio-cultural context of the work; and the cultural, political, and personal situation of the reader in relationship to the text. These critics tend to focus on the overall themes of the work as they relate to economic class, race,

sex, and instances of oppression and/or liberation. Author, critic and reader bias is explored.¹