INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY THEORY

Literary theory is an attempt to understand the various ways that different people read texts. Theory gives readers a chance to view a text with a so-called different set of lenses.

Literary theory becomes a genre of rebellion that is used against the generations that have analyzed literature over the years. It extends beyond literature in the sense of novels or poetry. It includes works of anthropology, art history, film studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, science studies, social and intellectual history, and sociology. It covers all areas of academia and beyond.

Literary theory pushes a reader to think beyond the obvious or what some would consider common sense. It pushes a reader into the act of "questioning … the most basic premises or assumptions of literary study" (Culler)

There are limitless theories that can be expounded upon in literature. This is because the authors and poets wrote the pieces with a desire to communicate social concerns, fear, passion, love, sadness, or religious fervor. Guerin et al. stated, "we may be sure that Shakespeare did not write Hamlet so that scholarly critical approaches to it could be formulated" . Literary theory comes from the emotions of the reader. As the piece is read, emotions are stirred and drive the reader down various theoretical paths based on their own personalities, past, and experiences. Guerin states that without this emotion the reader "might as well be merely proof-reading for factual accuracy or correct mechanical form."

One simple way of demonstrating the effect of theorizing literature is to see how different theories raise different questions about it from different foci of interest. The following diagram of linguistic communication, devised by Roman Jakobson, helps to distinguish some possible starting-points:

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER > MESSAGE > ADDRESSEE

CONTACT

CODE

An addresser sends a message to an addressee; the message uses a code (usually a language familiar to both addresser and addressee); the message has a context (or

'referent') and is transmitted through a contact (a medium such as live speech, the telephone or writing). For the purposes of discussing literature, the 'contact' is usually now the printed word (except, say, in drama or performance-poetry); and so we may restate the diagram thus:

CONTEXT

WRITER >   WRITING   > READER

CODE

If we adopt the addresser's viewpoint, we draw attention to the writer, and his or her emotive' or 'expressive' use of language; if we focus on the 'context', we isolate the 'referential' use of language and invoke its historical dimension at the point of the work's production; if we are principally interested in the addressee, we study the reader's reception of the 'message' , and so on.

Different literary theories also tend to place the emphasis upon one function rather than another; so we might represent some major earlier ones diagrammatically thus:

MARXIST

ROMANTIC > FORMALIST   >   READER

HUMANIST   STRUCTURALIST   ORIENTED

Romantic-humanist theories emphasize the writer's life and mind as expressed in his or her Work; 'reader' theories (phenomenological criticism) centre themselves on the reader's, or 'affective', experience; formalist theories concentrate on the nature of the writing itself; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical context as fundamental; and structuralist poetics draws attention to the codes we use to construct meaning.

However, it is noteworthy in what we have outlined above that none of the examples is taken from the more contemporary theoretical fields of feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism or queer theory. This is because all of these, in their different ways, disturb and disrupt the relations between the terms in the original diagram,