

SURVEY OF 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 literature was, and why we read literature, and what we read, were questions that subsequent movements in literary theory were to raise.

FORMALISM/NEW CRITICISM

“Formalism” is, as the name implies, an interpretive approach that emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text. Neither author nor context was essential for the Formalists; it was the narrative that spoke, the “hero-function,” for example, that had meaning. Form was the content. A plot device or narrative strategy was examined for how it functioned and compared to how it had functioned in other literary works.

KEY IDEA: Formalists assume the key to understanding a work lies inside the work itself. This kind of criticism seems to be relegated specifically to literature and the humanities.

QUESTIONS:

1. How does the work use imagery to develop its own symbols and motifs?
2. How is the work put together (structure, form, chapter, etc.)? What does the form of the work say about its content?
3. How are the various parts of the work interconnected?
4. How do paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension work in the text?
5. How do these parts and their collective whole contribute to or not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the work?
6. How does the author resolve apparent contradictions within the work?
7. How are the characters presented in the work?
8. Is there a central or focal passage that can be said to sum up the entirety of the work?
9. How do the rhythms and/or rhyme schemes of a poem contribute to the meaning or effect of the piece?
10. Sophisticated literary terms, tropes and figures.

MARXISM

Marxist literary theories focus on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinctions. Marxist theorists often champion authors sympathetic to the working classes and authors whose work challenges economic equalities found in capitalist societies. This criticism moves beyond the analysis of conventional literary themes and elements (style, plot, characterization, figures of speech, literary devices) and seeks to uncover an author’s world and her/his world view (ideology). A Marxist critic will begin such an analysis by showing how an author’s text reflects his/her ideology through an examination of characters, settings, or society. They may look at an author’s social class and how that might influence her/his work. Or a Marxist critic may look at the history and culture of the times and investigate how the author either correctly or incorrectly pictures this historical era.

KEY IDEA: Marxists believe that economic and social conditions determine religious beliefs, legal systems and cultural frameworks. Literature is a reflection of culture, and culture can be affected by literature. Marxists look at economic power, class conflict, ideas and ideologies, and materialism versus spirituality.

QUESTIONS:

1. Who are the powerful people in the text? Who are powerless? Who receives the most attention?
2. Why do the powerful have power? Who keeps the powerless from having power?
3. Is there a class conflict and struggle?
4. Is there alienation and fragmentation evident in any of the characters?
5. What can you infer about the distribution of wealth from the setting?
6. What does the society value? How are acquisitions valued, for their usefulness or their social value?
7. Is the text itself a product of the society in which it was created? How do you know?
8. What is the social class of the author?

STRUCTURALISM

Structuralists examine the way words and phrases become signifiers, and look for signs in language that provide meaning. Sometimes called Deconstruction, this is a complicated and sophisticated theoretical practice. Structuralists claim that the narrative is a fiction that locks readers into interpreting text in a single, chronological manner that does not reflect our experiences. “Postmodern” or structuralist critics see knowledge and words as local, situated, slippery, and self-critical (i.e. it questions itself and its role). Because post-structural work is self-critical, post-structural critics even look for ways texts contradict themselves.

KEY IDEA: The author is displaced as absolute author(ity), and the reader plays a role in interpreting the text and developing meaning (as best as possible) from the text. Interpretation of texts becomes a collaborative process between author and audience.

QUESTIONS:

1. How are the various parts of the work interconnected?
2. How does the work undermine or contradict generally accepted truths?
3. How does the author (or a character) omit, change, or reconstruct memory and identity?
4. How does a work fulfill or move outside the established conventions of its genre?
5. What ideology does the text promote?
6. What is left out of the text that if included might undermine the goal of the work?
7. If we changed the point of view of the text - say from one character to another, or multiple characters - how would the story change?
8. Whose story is not told in the text? Who is left out and why might the author have omitted this character’s tale?
9. How does the work use imagery to develop its own symbols?
10. Does how the work is put together reflect what it is?

NEW HISTORICISM

This school, influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories, seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time. New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it. Both "New Historicism" and "Cultural Materialism" seek to understand literary texts historically and reject the formalizing influence of previous literary studies, including "New Criticism," "Structuralism" and "Deconstruction," all of which in varying ways privilege the literary text and place only secondary emphasis on historical and social context.

KEY IDEA: New Historicists ask, 'How has the event been interpreted?' and 'What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?'. New Historicists do not believe that we can look at history objectively, but rather that we interpret events as products of our time and culture. Moreover, New Historicism holds that we are hopelessly subjective interpreters of what we observe.

QUESTIONS:

1. What language/characters/events present in the work reflect the current events of the author's day?
2. What events occurred in the author's life that has shaped his ideas or made him/her who he/she is?
3. What did the author read that may have shaped his/her philosophy?
4. What are the author's political views?
5. What was the author's social level? To what did the author aspire?
6. Are there words in the text that have changed their meaning from the time of the writing?
7. How does the author interpret and present the events of the novel? How are these events a product of the culture of the author?
8. Does the work's presentation support or condemn the event? Can it be seen to do both?
9. How does this portrayal criticize the leading political figures or movements of the day?
10. How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period...?
11. How does the work consider traditionally marginalized populations or traditions within the work?
12. How did the public and critics receive the work? How has the work been received since its writing?
13. What different perspectives of history does this work reveal, discuss, ignore, etc.?

FEMINISM

S/he. Feminist criticism is concerned with the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently male dominated.

Three main points of feminism: a) differences between men and women, b) women in power or power relationships between men and women, c) the female experience.

KEY IDEA: Feminist critics may argue:

1. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so;
2. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values;
3. All of western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology;
4. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine);
5. All feminist activity has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality;
6. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

QUESTIONS:

1. How are the females in the work portrayed? Oversimplified, weak, foolish, naive?
2. How is the relationship between men and women portrayed? Are women in dominant or submissive roles, major or minor parts?
3. What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)? Social, political, psychological?
4. How are male and female roles defined? If characters take on different roles, how are they treated by society?
5. What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
6. How do characters embody these traits? How do they talk about and act toward each other?
7. What does the work reveal about the economics, politics, society, or psychology of patriarchy?
8. What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood?
9. What does the work say about women's creativity?
10. How did the public and critics receive the work?
11. What role the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition?
12. Are the presentations of women and the situations they find themselves believable?
13. Is the work sympathetic to female characters?

(For the brave, consider Gender Theory as well)

CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural criticism, or cultural studies, is related to New Historicism but with a particular and cross-disciplinary emphasis on taking seriously those works traditionally marginalized by the aesthetic ideology of white European males. It examines social, economic, and political conditions that effect institutions and products such as literature and questions traditional value hierarchies. Thus it scrutinizes the habitual privileging of race, class, and gender, and also subverts the standard distinctions between "high art" and low. Instead of more attention to the canon, cultural studies examines works by minority ethnic groups and postcolonial writers, the products of folk, urban, and mass culture. Popular literature, soap opera, rock and rap music, cartoons, professional wrestling, food, etc. -- all fall within the domain of cultural criticism.

KEY IDEA: Cultural critics may argue:

Focus should show works in reference to other works, economic contexts, or broad social discourses (about childbirth, women's education, rural decay, etc.) within whose contexts the work makes sense. Perhaps most important, critics doing cultural studies should counter the prevalent notion that culture is some wholeness that has already been formed. Culture, rather, is really a set of interactive cultures, alive and growing

QUESTIONS:

1. How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period...?
2. How can we use a literary work to "map" the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the culture in which that work emerged and/or the cultures in which the work has been interpreted?
3. How does the work consider traditionally marginalized populations?
4. What are the forces most powerfully shaping and changing culture?
5. How are people "people"? How do they experience conditions they find themselves in and creatively respond to those conditions in their social practices?
6. How do the superior cultures reflect or not reflect the needs of the economic base?
7. How does the "working class" reflect the dominant or subordinate culture? What is desired, asked for, and given from the dominant to the subordinate culture?
8. What cultural traits survive the inclusion with the dominant class? Clothing, food, music, gender relations, houses, who is responsible for what tasks, language, accent, expectations toward children, types of careers, cleanliness, eating habits, etc.

PSYCHOANALYTIC/ FREUDIAN [1] ID/EGO/SUPEREGO

Psychoanalytic criticism builds on Freudian theories of psychology. Freud believed that our unconscious was influenced by childhood events (Oedipus/Electra). Freud organized these events into developmental stages involving relationships with parents and drives of desire and pleasure. Freud was interested in what humans reveal and what they repress both consciously and subconsciously. Freud argued that we develop defenses: selective perception, selective memory, denial, displacement, projection, regression, fear of intimacy, and fear of death, among others. There is a strong emphasis on dreams as subconscious deliverers of meaning and desire.

Id, Ego, and Superego

Freud maintained that our desires and our unconscious conflicts give rise to three areas of the mind that wrestle for dominance as we grow from infancy, to childhood, to adulthood:

- id - basic desire, childish drives. No sense of conscience or patience. Immediate gratification
- superego - socially imposed behavior and sense of guilt. Parental influence, society's laws.
- ego - reality. The balance between the id and superego. Desires are filtered through the rules and mores of the superego. The ego recognizes that the id must be satisfied by there are socially acceptable ways to go about it.

KEY IDEA: Put simply, some critics believe that we can read literature psychoanalytically ...to see which concepts are operating in the text in such a way as to enrich our understanding of the work.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are the traits of the main character? How does the author reveal these traits?
2. What do you learn about the character through the narrator? from the other characters?
3. Are there any oedipal dynamics - or any other family dynamics - are work here?
4. What can you infer about a character from his/her thoughts, actions, and speech? What does the character believe about himself?
5. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and the reader's inferences?
6. What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author?
7. What symbols are used in the story?
8. Do any of the characters have dreams or inner monologues? What does this reveal?
9. What are the inner conflicts and how are these conflicts revealed?
10. How does the dynamic character change throughout the story? Why does this occur?

PSYCHOANALYTIC/ FREUDIAN [2] AUTHOR

The second view of Psychoanalytic criticism is that an essential relationship exists between the author of the work and the work itself. In order to understand this work, the reader must understand the author's life and emotional stance, and this gives meaning to the text. Note: this is in direct contrast to Formalism.

Although a work may not be obviously autobiographical, psychoanalysts argue that there is always something of the author in the work, whether it is a character, trait, theme or motif. They will look for satire or author bias and will examine how the author intends this bias to shape the opinion of the reader.

KEY IDEA: Psychoanalysts in this second school of thought will look at the following:

- 1) what is known or surmised about the author's personality,
- 2) an examination of the mind of the author,
- 3) how reading the novel is a means of knowing the author as a person,
- 4) how characters on the page act out the repressed desires of the author. (Particularly actions or beliefs which might not be socially acceptable.)

QUESTIONS:

1. What is known about the author's young life, experiences, schooling, relationships, struggles and successes, etc.?
2. What has the author presented himself or herself-- or what has been learned about the interiority of his own mind and thoughts?
3. How can we KNOW the author, the characters or ourselves based on the way the author presents the characters?
4. How do the characters represent attitudes, choices, opinions and experiences that the author wanted for himself or herself... or for the world to come?
5. Which choices/relationships are made in the text which would NOT be allowed in the world at that time? Examine gender, race, social status, age, ability, judgment, etc.
6. What can the reader understand about the author's life and emotional stance, and how do this give meaning to the text?
7. How does the author intend to use the text to shape the opinion of the reader?

PSYCHOANALYTIC/ THE OTHER

Psychoanalytic, Marxist and Post-Colonial criticism deals with the idea of the Other, or the individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way. Any stranger becomes the Other. The group sees itself as the norm and judges those who do not meet that norm (that is, who are different in any way) as the Other. Perceived as lacking essential characteristics possessed by the group, the Other is almost always seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly. The Other in a society may have few or no legal rights, may be characterized as less intelligent or as immoral, and may even be regarded as sub-human.

KEY IDEA:

The Other may be someone who is of:

- a different race, nationality
- a different gender or gender-neutral
- a different religion
- a different social class
- a different political ideology
- a different sexual orientation
- a different origin

The group which is defining the Other may be an entire society, a social class or a community within a society, a family, or even a high school clique or a neighborhood gang.

Unlike the Outsider, who has the possibility of being accepted by and incorporated into the group, The Other, is perceived as different in kind, as lacking in some essential trait or traits that the group has.

QUESTIONS:

1. Who has the power and authority in the ONE group and is empowered to identify The Other?
2. How is The Other produced: internally or externally?
 - a) internal is when the group identifies itself
 - b) external is when a group is defined by somebody else
3. Is The Other a group or a category?
4. What aspects, manners, or traits has the ONE control group determined as Otherness?
5. Which choices/relationships are made in the text which would NOT be allowed in the world at that time? Examine gender, race, social status, age, ability, judgment, etc.
6. What does the ONE group refuse to accept about The Other, that would make him/her powerful or contributory to the ONE collective?
7. How does the author present The Other and his/her pov? Is the author sympathetic or judgmental?
8. What is the reader left with in terms of understanding or accepting The Other?

JUNGIAN/ARCHETYPAL

Jungian criticism attempts to explore the connection between literature and what Carl Jung (a student of Freud) called the “collective unconscious” of the human race. Jungian criticism, closely related to Freudian theory because of its connection to psychoanalysis, assumes that all stories and symbols are based on mythic models from mankind’s past, and that humans subconsciously access shared symbols, patterns and personalities and that we have done this since the beginning of time, despite distance, time and language barriers. We fill our stories with these shared traits, called archetypes.

Based on these commonalities, Jung developed archetypal myths: the Mask, the Shadow, the Anima, the Animus, and the Spirit. You will need to refer to the other handout on Archetypes for a more complete discussion of this critical school of thought.

In literary analysis, a Jungian critic would look for archetypes in creative works. When dealing with this sort of criticism, it is often useful to keep and handbook of mythology and a dictionary of symbols on hand.

KEY IDEA: Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols, recurring themes, characters and situations. By drawing on these shared feelings, thoughts, concerns and issues we become functional in the human condition.

Key to this idea are the archetypes, of which there are many. A few are the Hero, the Scapegoat, the Loner/Outcast, the Temptress, the God or Goddess, the Spirit, the Sage/Shaman, the Crone, and the Warrior. Archetypal images are colors, numbers, water, gardens, geometric shapes, celestial bodies, and the yin/yang. Archetypal situations are the Quest, the Renewal of Life, the Initiation, the Fall, and the Redemptive Sacrifice.

QUESTIONS:

1. What connections can we make between elements of the text and the archetypes?
2. How do the characters in the text mirror the archetypal figures?
3. How does the text mirror the archetypal narrative patterns? (Quest, Night-Sea-Journey)
4. How symbolic is the imagery in the work?
5. How are the symbols in the work different in any way from the traditional use of the symbol?
6. How does the protagonist reflect the hero of myth?
7. Does the “hero” embark on a journey in either a physical or spiritual sense? What new knowledge does he gain along the way?
8. Is there a journey to an underworld or land of the dead?
9. What trials or ordeals does the protagonist face? What is the reward for overcoming them?
10. What myths are at work in different parts of the text? What features of the story are reminiscent of other stories that you know?
11. How are the settings in the story archetypal or symbolic?
12. How is this work universal?

POST-COLONIAL

History is Written by the Victors. Post-colonial critics are concerned with literature produced by colonial powers and works produced by those who were/are colonized. Post-colonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony. Therefore, a post-colonial critic might be interested in works such as Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe or Conrad’s Heart of Darkness where there are obvious colonist or anti-colonist agendas.

A Unique Perspective on Empire

Seminal post-colonial writers such as Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o have written a number of stories recounting the suffering of colonized people. (Things Fall Apart).

KEY IDEA: A post-colonial critic might question the works included in “the canon” because the canon does not contain works by authors outside western culture, and will work to point out the legitimacy of their cultures, whether third world or otherwise.

QUESTIONS:

1. How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression?
2. What does the text reveal about the problematics of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?
3. What person(s) or groups does the work identify as “other” or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated?
4. What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anti-colonialist resistance?
5. What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?
6. How does the text respond to or comment upon the characters, themes, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) work?
7. Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different post-colonial populations?
8. How does a literary text in the Western canon reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of colonialization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples?

ECO-CRITICISM

Ecocriticism has been and continues to be an “earth-centered approach” examining the complex intersections between environment and culture, believing that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glottfelty xix). Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, calling for collaboration between natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists, historians, and more. Taking an ecocritical approach to a topic means asking questions not only of a primary source such as literature, but asking larger questions about cultural attitudes towards and definitions of nature. Ecocritics either interpret a text through an ecocritical lens, with an eye towards nature, or examining an ecocritical trope within the text.

KEY IDEA: Ecocriticism asks us to examine ourselves and the world around us, critiquing the way that we represent, interact with, and construct the environment, both “natural” and manmade. At the heart of ecocriticism, many maintain, is “a commitment to environmentalism from whatever critical vantage point” (Buell 11). The “challenge” for ecocritics is “keep[ing] one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always [...] culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists” (Gerrard 10). Ecocriticism deals not only with the socially-constructed, often dichotomous categories we create for reality, but with reality itself.

QUESTIONS:

1. How is nature represented in this text?
2. How has the concept of nature changed over time?
3. How is the setting of the play/film/text related to the environment?
4. What is the influence on metaphors and representations of the land and the environment on how we treat it?
5. How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in popular culture and literary works?
6. How are animals represented in this text and what is their relationship to humans?
7. How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in this play/film/text/etc.
8. Where is the environment placed in the power hierarchy?
9. How is nature empowered or oppressed in this work?
10. What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities, immigrants, etc.) and treatment of the land?
11. What rhetorical moves are used by environmentalists, and what can we learn from them about our cultural attitudes towards nature?

