



Literary Theory

- Theory, Cultural Theory, Literary Theory
- A 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.
- “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.” (*Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*)



Literary Theory

“All literary interpretation draws on a basis in theory but can serve as a justification for very different kinds of critical activity.” (*Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*)

“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.” (*Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*)

Literary Theory

- 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." (IEP)
- "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." (IEP)



Theory – What’s it good for?

“Critical theory seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* 1972)



How might it be used?

“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.”

(IEP)

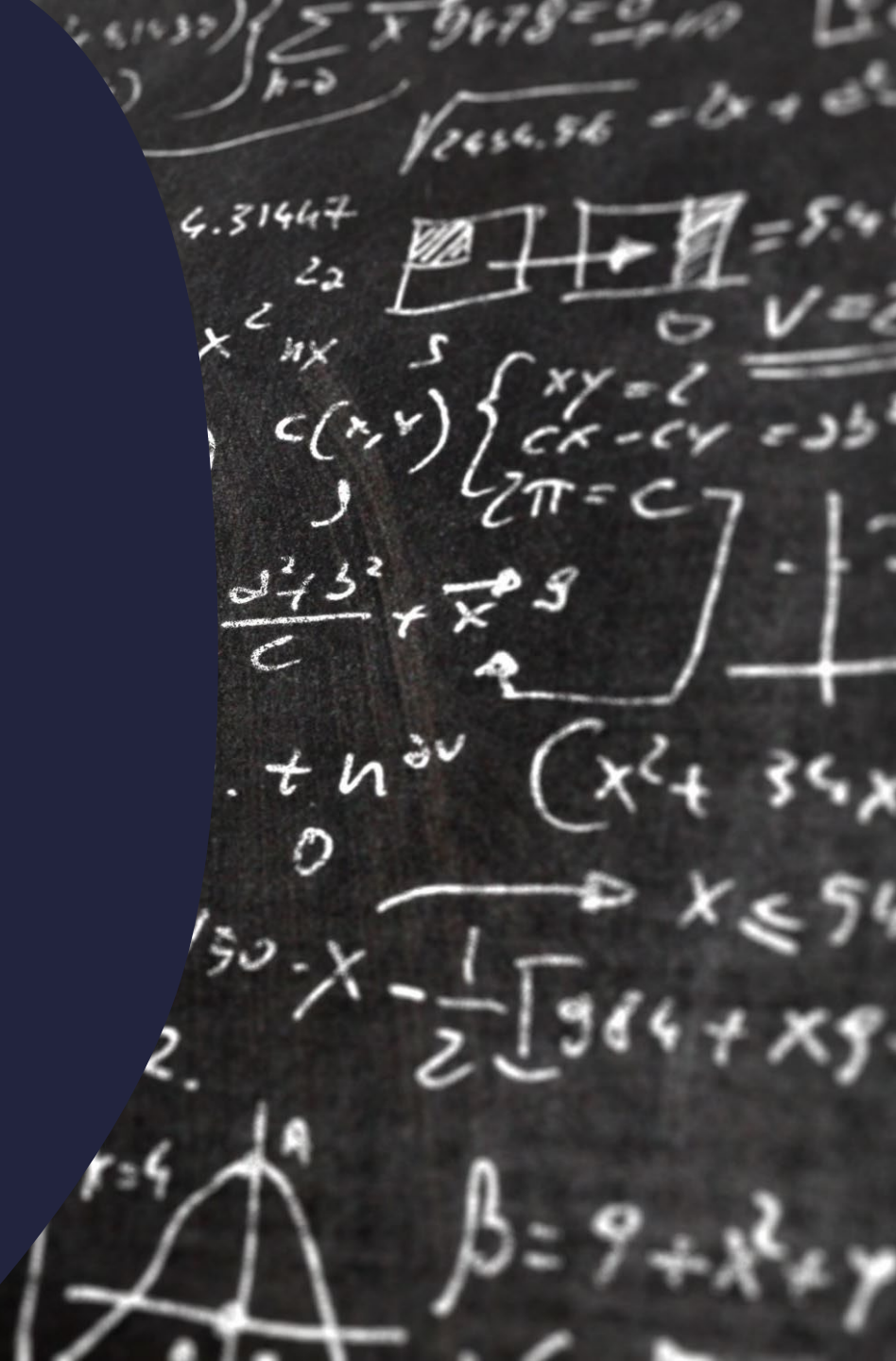


Meaning & Use

- Etymology: “theory,” from the Greek “theoria”
- ““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.” (IEP).

Meaning & Use

- "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." (IEP)



- **Moral Criticism, Dramatic Construction (~360 BC-present)**

“what artists do is hold the mirror up to nature...but this need involve nothing more than conjecture.”(Plato)

- **Formalism, New Criticism (1930s-present)**

Form Follows Function

- **Psychoanalytic Criticism, Jungian Criticism (1930s-present)**

The Unconscious, the Desires, and the Defences

- **Structuralism/Semiotics (1920s-present)**

"...practically everything we do that is specifically human is expressed in language" (Richter 809).

- **Marxist Criticism (1930s-present)**

Whom does it Benefit?

- **Postmodernism (1950s-present)**

“Incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard)

- **Feminist Criticism (1960s-present)**

Does it reinforce/undermine economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women?

- **Poststructuralism/Deconstruction (1966-present)**

What Does Your Meaning Mean?

- **Gender/Queer Studies (1970s-present)**

Gender trouble...

- **Postcolonial Criticism (1990s-present)**

History is Written by the winners

Ecocriticism (1970s-present)

Thinks about the relationship between literature and the environment and how representation might have an impact (or otherwise) on our understanding of the planet on which we live.

How to Engage with Theory: Some tips

- Read deeply rather than broadly (see Peter Barry Pg4)
- Find the things that interest you
- Apply these ideas to other things you are reading, or have read
- Don't criticize yourself if the language of theorists seems difficult; it is!



Slow Readers

"I suggest that it is much better to read *intensely* in theory rather than to read *widely*. By this I mean that you will gain little by reading chapter after chapter of a book that is making little sense to you. You will gain much more by using the same amount of reading time to read one crucial and frequently mentioned chapter or article several times for yourself. Having a detailed knowledge of what is actually said in the pages of a well-known argument, being aware of how the argument unfolds and how it is qualified and contextualized, will be far more useful to you than a superficial overall impression gained from commentaries or desperate skim-reading. However daunting the material, you have to make your reading meditative, reflective, and personal. Try to become a slow reader. Further, some intensive reading of this kind will enable you to quote lines other than the handful that are cited in all the commentaries. And most importantly, your view of things will be your own, perhaps quirky and incomplete but at least not just the echo and residue of some published commentators prepacked version. In a nut-shell, intensive reading is often more useful than extensive reading."

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 4.



“Theory”—a reaction against

Literary theories, as Peter Barry notes, tend to be “reaction[s] to something that went before”—often we need literary theory to help us be aware of our blind spots, or to look at things from new points of view.

- What literary theories are you familiar with?
- What do they react against?
- What do they help us recognize as readers?

Theory: Some Fundamentals

Any reading is necessarily influenced or informed by own ideological commitments. These can be theoretical or political—but we always bring some personal bias

The 'facts' of the world are fluid and unstable—from history and science, to more personal notions like gender identity, ideas of self, and the concept of literature. Rather than absolute or "essential," these are socially constructed and contingent categories.

We shape our world through language. This means that the way we perceive, experience, and understand the world around us is tied to language. Life, in an important sense is textual.

But language is also unstable, meaning what a writer means and what a reader understands will always be different, and there will never be a single, fixed meaning of a text.

Theory: Context

Ways to Engage with Theory



Theoretical Framework for thesis



Engage with a variety of theoretical positions for interpretation



Challenge theoretical approaches



Question their appropriateness for your study/texts/topic



Assert that there are good points, but also limitations

Do not...

Accept

Passively accept theory

Look

Only look at one perspective/voice

Dismiss

Outright dismiss a recognised approach just because it doesn't work for your analysis (do be gentle and respectful with how you explain your challenge)

Activity

- Read Emily Jeremiah's article "'The "I" inside "her": Queer Narration in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune*'
- How does Jeremiah engage with theory?
- What do you think you might learn from Jeremiah's practice (ie how she engages with theory)?
- How is she actively, rather than passively engaged with theory and criticism in her writing?
- Note down your thoughts on the padlet: <https://uon1.padlet.org/claireallen4/pgr-workshop-theory-h8w67ptfgazkk88d>

Analysing how theory is used

1. Interesting that it starts with a quotation from Butler, this positions the argument clearly from the beginning. However at PhD level it is best not to start with the words of others, but rather establish the point from your own perspective.
2. Jeremiah immediately goes on to engage with the theory, highlight the key aspects relevant for her argument, rather than simply letting the quotation do the work for her; instead she draws attention to the key aspects.
3. She then clearly relates this to her context, eg the postmodern subject, aligning Butler's ideas with postmodernism in terms of understanding gender.
4. All of this in the first paragraph!
5. However, it would be better to link to your argument/ your point

Further Reading

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester University Press. (any edition)
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Rivkin, Julie and Ryan, Michael. Eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998.
- Waugh, Patricia (editor). *An Oxford Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. OUP, 2006 (particularly the introduction)
- *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*:
<https://iep.utm.edu/literary/#:~:text=It%20is%20literary%20theory%20that,their%20thematic%20presence%20within%20texts>.