

An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory

Before we begin our examination and study of literary theory, it is important that we define exactly what literary theory is and is not, identify some of the main characteristics of such, as well as identify some of the key differences between traditional “literary criticism” and “literary theory.”

While literary criticism since the late 19th century has often made use of different “theories” drawn from the social and natural sciences, philosophy, and other scholarly fields, strictly defined “schools” of literary theory began to appear throughout European and North American intellectual circles, colleges, and universities in the middle part of the 20th century. The rise of literary theory during this time—and its continued popularity in European and American universities’ literature and humanities departments—is owed to a number of social and cultural factors. In particular, these factors include the development of post-structural philosophy in American and European colleges and universities; the popularity of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and other social and cultural theories throughout the intellectual world; and the multi- and cross-disciplinary academic ideology that began to pervade colleges and universities during the last half of the 20th century.

Strictly defined, “literary criticism” refers to the act of interpreting and studying literature. A literary critic is not someone who merely evaluates the worth or quality of a piece of literature but, rather, is someone who argues on behalf of an interpretation or understanding of the particular meaning(s) of literary texts. The task of a literary critic is to explain and attempt to reach a critical understanding of what literary texts mean in terms of their aesthetic, as well as social, political, and cultural statements and suggestions. A literary critic does more than simply discuss or evaluate the importance of a literary text; rather, a literary critic seeks to reach a logical and reasonable understanding of not only what a text’s author intends for it to mean but, also, what different cultures and ideologies render it capable of meaning.

“Literary theory,” however, refers to a particular form of literary criticism in which particular academic, scientific, or philosophical approaches are followed in a systematic fashion while analyzing literary texts. For example, a psychoanalytic theorist might examine and interpret a literary text strictly through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis and psychology and, in turn, offer an interpretation or reading of a text that focuses entirely on the psychological dimensions of it. Traditional literary criticism tends not to focus on a particular aspect of (or approach to) a literary text in quite the same manner that literary theory usually does. Literary theory proposes particular, systematic approaches to literary texts that impose a particular line of intellectual reasoning to it. For example, a psychoanalytic literary theorist might take the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung and seek to reach a critical understanding of a novel such as Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. A literary theorist applying, perhaps, Sigmund Freud’s notions of trauma to Hemingway’s novel might explore the protagonist’s psychology, using Freud’s theoretical “tools,” and



argue that the protagonist suffers from what Freud termed “shell shock” and that the novel, then, can reasonably be argued to be a commentary upon the effects of war on the psychology of individuals. Literary theorists often adapt systems of knowledge developed largely outside the realm of literary studies and impose them upon literary texts for the purpose of discovering or developing new and unique understandings of those texts that a traditional literary critic might not be intellectually equipped to recognize.

With that said, some literary critics and theorists deny that there is a distinct difference between literary criticism and literary theory and argue that literary theory is simply a more advanced form of literary criticism. Other critics argue that literary theory itself is far more systematic, developed and scholarly than literary criticism, and hence of a far greater intellectual and critical value than traditional literary criticism per se. Rarely do different groups of literary theorists agree exactly as to how to define what literary theory is and how it is similar to or different from traditional literary criticism.

Today, literary theory is practiced by a vast majority of college literature professors, research scholars, and students throughout English, literature, and humanities departments in North America and Europe. While some literary scholars debate the ultimate value of literary theory as a method of interpretation (and some critics, in fact, object to the practicality of literary theory entirely), it is nevertheless vital for students of literature to understand the core principles of literary theory and be able to use those same principles to interpret literary texts. Most students studying literature at the college level are, to some degree or another, trained not simply to be critics of literature but, moreover, to function as theorists of literature with the ability to offer interpretations of literary texts through several different theoretical perspectives.

The study of literary theory is challenging, especially for students who are relatively new to the field. It takes time, patience, and practice for students to get used to the unique and sometimes highly specialized language that literary theorists tend to use in their writings as well as the often complicated and detailed arguments they make. As you are exposed to literary theory, take the time to carefully consider the argument being made, to re-read when you find yourself confused by a statement, and to look up and acquaint yourself with any language or terminology you are exposed to and not familiar with (the glossary of terms provided in this course will prove helpful for that). Literary theory can be quite challenging to master but such nevertheless can allow for incredibly insights into literary texts that would otherwise be unreachable without making use of the interpretive apparatus of literary theory.

An Introduction to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare’s 1602 play *Hamlet* is arguably the single most “theorized” literary text in the English language. *Hamlet*’s aesthetic, psychological, political, philosophical, and literary depth and richness has made the play not only among the most frequently performed, adapted, revised, and studied texts in English literature but also among the



most widely taught, debated, and researched literary texts in the world. Several hundred scholarly books and thousands of scholarly articles have been published about *Hamlet* over the last hundred years alone, with new articles and scholarly books appearing every year on the topic of Shakespeare's most famous and controversial play. The play's richness and ambiguity—as well as its revolutionary style and characterizations—allows for a plethora of different interpretations to be reasonably applied to it, hence the reason the literary theorist Harold Bloom refers to *Hamlet* as a “poem unlimited.” Nearly every form of literary theory that we will study in this course—from psychoanalysis and new historicism to feminist theory and queer theory—can be readily applied to *Hamlet* in order to develop a deeper critical understanding of the play. In this course, our readings about different literary theories will be supported not only with brief essays that seek to provide students with a general overview of the theories at hand, but also with interpretations of *Hamlet* through the perspective of the literary theories we study.

The purpose of this exercise is for you to be able to not only see the theories we study be put into practical use, but also to be able to recognize the different ways a single text can be interpreted using different literary theories. That is not to suggest that a definitive critical or theoretical reading of *Hamlet* will be offered in this course. Instead, *Hamlet* will be used as a springboard through which we will be able to recognize how different literary theories can be applied to a literary text in order to explore new dimensions of interpretation.

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between the act of traditional literary criticism and literary theory?
2. What are some of the critical advantages and disadvantages of literary theory?

