

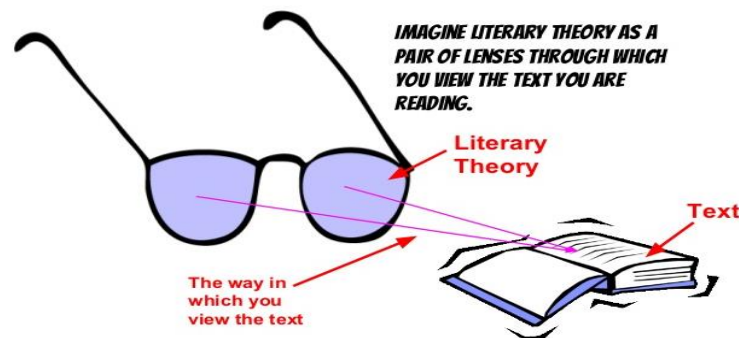
	Mohamed Kheider University of Biskra	
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Lecture One: Introduction to Critical Theory

I. Literary Theory

A. Definition of Literary Theory

A better understanding of literary theory can be gained by investigating the etymology of the word *theory* itself. Derived from the Greek word *theoria*, the word theory means a “view or perspective of the Greek stage.” Literary theory, then, offers to us a view of life, an understanding of why we interpret texts the way we do. Consider the various places in the theatre we, the audience, may sit. Depending on our seats—whether we are close to the stage, far back, to the far left, to the far right, or in the middle row—our view and, therefore, our interpretation of the events taking place on the stage will alter. Literary theory figuratively and literally asks where we are “sitting” when we are reading a text. What exactly is influencing us during the reading process? Our culture? Our understanding of the nature of literature itself? Our political or social views? These and similar questions (and their answers) directly and indirectly and consciously and unconsciously affect our interpretation and our enjoyment of a text. To be able to articulate such underlying assumptions about how we read texts enables us, the readers, to establish for ourselves a lucid and logical practical criticism.

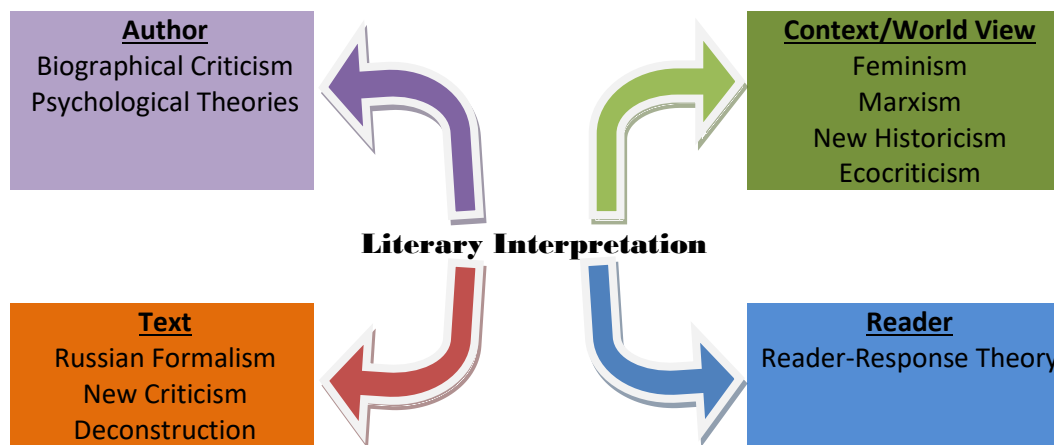


When reading a text, every reader espouses some kind of literary theory. Every reader’s theory may be conscious or unconscious, whole or partial, informed or ill informed, eclectic or unified. An incomplete, unconscious, and, therefore, unclear literary theory leads to illogical, unsound, and haphazard interpretations. On the other hand, a conscious, well-defined, logical, and clearly articulated theory enables readers to develop a method by which to establish principles that enable them to justify, order, and clarify their own appraisals of a literary text in a consistent manner. When we can clearly articulate our mental framework values and aesthetic judgments about the text, we are all on our way to developing a coherent, unified **literary theory**.

B. Literary Theory and the Definition of Literature

The definition of literature depends on the particular kinds of literary theory that the reader or critic espouses. For formalists, for example, the text and text alone contains certain qualities that make a particular piece of writing literature. On the other hand, for reader-oriented critics, the interaction between the text and the reader help determine whether a document should be deemed literary. A working knowledge of literary theory can, thus, help all readers formulate their ever-developing definitions of literature and what they believe constitutes a literary work.

As far as modern literary theory is concerned, literary interpretation could be viewed from four main lenses: author, text, reader, and context.



C. Literary Theory and Methodology

It is important to bear in mind that theory and methodology are closely related. On the one hand, theory informs methodology. Thus, the questions we ask about a literary text will determine which tools we are going to use to analyze it. On the other hand, methodology can yield results which may ultimately change an already existing theory.

II. Literary Criticism

A. Definition of Literary Criticism

Literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to **describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret, and evaluate** works of art. By necessity, this discipline attempts to formulate aesthetic and methodological principles on which the critic can evaluate a text. Anyone who attempts to evaluate texts in this fashion is a literary critic, a term derived from two Greek words, *krinō*, meaning “to judge,” and *kritēs*, meaning “a judge or jury person.” A literary critic, or *kritikōs*, is therefore a “judge of literature.”

B. Theoretical criticism and Practical criticism

Traditionally, literary critics involve themselves in either theoretical or practical criticism. **Theoretical criticism** formulates the theories, principles, and tenets of the nature and value of art. By citing general aesthetic and moral principles of art, theoretical criticism provides the necessary framework for practical criticism. **Practical criticism** (also known as **applied criticism**) applies the theories and tenets of theoretical criticism to a particular work. Using the theories and principles of theoretical criticism, the practical critic defines the standards of taste and explains, evaluates, or justifies a particular piece of literature. A further distinction is made between a practical critic who posits that there is only one theory or set of principles a critic may use when evaluating a literary work—an **absolutist critic**—and a **relativistic critic**, one who uses various and even contradictory theories in critiquing a text. The basis for either kind of critic or any form of criticism is literary theory. Without theory, practical criticism could not exist.

C. Literary Criticism

We can know a text in two distinct ways. The first way involves the typical literature classroom analysis. When we have studied, analyzed, and critiqued a text and arrived at an interpretation, we can then confidently assert that we know the text. On the other hand, when we stay up all night turning the pages of P.D. James’s latest mystery novel *The Lighthouse* to discover who the murderer is, we can also say that we know the text because we have spent time devouring its pages, lost in its secondary world, consumed by its characters, and by the novel’s end, eagerly seeking the resolution of its tension. Both methods—one with its chief goal to learn, the other to entertain—involve similar yet distinct epistemological endpoints: to know a text, but in two different ways.

The French verbs **savoir** and **connaître** can both be translated “to know” and can highlight for us the difference between these two epistemological goals or ways or ways of knowing a text. *Savoir* means

“to analyze” (from the Greek *analuein*, to under) and “to study.” The word is used to refer to knowing something that is the object of study and assumes that the object, such as a text, can be examined, analyzed, and critiqued. Knowledge or learning **about** is the ultimate goal. *Connaître*, on the other hand, implies that we intimately know or have experienced the text. Interestingly, *connaître* is used for knowing people and also refers to knowing an author’s canon. Both knowing persons and knowing all a writer’s works imply intimacy, learning the particular qualities of one person or author, the ins and outs of each. Indeed, it is this intimacy that one often experiences while reading a mystery novel all night long. It is knowing or knowledge **of** that the word means.

To say that we know a text is no simple statement. Underlying our private and public reactions and our scholarly critiques and analyses is our literary theory, the fountainhead of our most intimate and our most public declarations. The formal study of literary theory therefore enables us to explain our responses to any text and allows us to articulate the function of literature in an academic and a personal way.