Literature, literary theory and literary criticism. An Introduction

This website features poetry, drama and prose from the sixteenth century to the present day. Each work is introduced in its social, cultural and literary context. For each text, two literary theories are suggested. There is also a short discussion of the nature and significance of the chosen theories. For the texts in the later chapters, you are asked to select your own theory.

A clear distinction is made between literary theory and literary criticism. Literary theory is defined as the study of general principles. It recognises that the assumptions made by some critics about writers, readers and what we consider to be “reality” must be questioned and re-formulated. This process may alter the ways in which we read and interpret. The literary theorist tries to understand the nature of literature, the functions of literature and its relations to the author, reader, language, society, and to history etc. If someone says that “all good literature is about love and death”, s/he is a literary theorist!

Literary criticism is defined as the study of particular cases. It involves the reading and interpretation of, and commentary on, a specific text or texts which have been designated as literature. The literary critic analyses a particular text or set of texts so that s/he can make a claim about it. Your level-III essay is an example of literary criticism.

What is literary theory good for? You already have certain theories about literature: you have made decisions about what to write about as well as how to write at different stages in your student career. With theory, you become more specific and concrete in your analyses.

Before reading the unit ‘Poetry I. “The inevitability of death. William Shakespeare and Andrew Marvell”’, consider the following questions:

What is the function of literature? Why do I read literature?
What is the purpose of writing about literature? What is the function of literary criticism?
How does one “do” literary criticism? What are the tools of the trade of the literary critic?

The history of theory

Aristotle (384-322 BC) wrote in his famous Poetics that all literature is tragedy. It is imitative (mimetic) of real experience, but it is also creative and universal in that it represents artistically human conditions to which everyone can relate. Aristotle argues that literature uses specific, analysable techniques in achieving its ends. These techniques include plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. Plot is of paramount importance. It should be unified and linear, i.e. it should not jump around in time and space but proceed logically and naturally from start to finish. Plots, according to Aristotle, can be classified as “simple” or “complex”.

For Aristotle, the function of tragedy is to express fear and pity; its purpose is to purge the audience’s emotions: tragedy is, in other words, cathartic. Creative use of language is also needed to produce catharsis. So if we were to follow Aristotle’s theory, we would show how a novel creates fear and pity and purges the reader’s emotions. We would also show how the creative use of language contributes to this effect.

Aristotle’s chief contributions to literary criticism include:

a) A work of art is an imitation of nature that reflects a high form of art in exhibiting noble
characters and noble deeds. The act of imitation gives the reader pleasure.

b) Art possesses form: it has a beginning, middle and an end. Each part is related to the other parts. A tragedy is thus an organic whole.

c) Tragedy must have an emotional effect on its audience and bring about “catharsis”, i.e. through pity and fear a tragedy should purge, purify or clarify the audience’s emotions.

d) The universal rather than the particular should be stressed, for unlike history, which deals with events, poetry or tragedy deals with what could happen and is thus closer to perfection or truth.

e) While the poet must pay attention to diction or language itself, it is the thoughts expressed through language that are of the utmost concern.

All subsequent literary theorists have followed in Aristotle’s footsteps although they have developed particular focuses, e.g. psychology (Freud), politics (Marx), and ethics (Sidney). Almost all have recognised the connection between poetics and rhetoric, and between poetry, comedy and tragedy and the art of persuasion.

During the Romantic period, critics offered people an imaginative world of poetry, which acted as a protest against and consolation for the harsh social reality of the industrial revolution. During this period, art was considered to be separate from real life; it was elevated above the day-to-day business of living and became a cult object: “Art for Art’s sake”. Other critics saw literature as a compensation for religion: social ills and inequalities could, they believed, be cured, or at the very least alleviated by literature.

The Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) had a profound impact on literary criticism. In his preface to Lyrical Ballads, he argues for a plainer and more emphatic language, the language used by the common people. And it is the common people who are the subject of his poetry. For Wordsworth, all good poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Imagination rather than reason or disciplined thought became the core of poetry during the Romantic period.

During the Victorian period, the serious rather than the spontaneous nature of literature was emphasised. For Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), for example, poetry was mankind’s crowning activity. The best poetry, Arnold argued, is serious and provides standards of moral excellence by which a society should judge itself.

Henry James (1843-1916) also emphasised the moral worth and realistic nature of literature. He argued that literature should represent life as it really is, and as it is recognized by readers. Good novels show life in action and are, above all, interesting. James shunned the omniscient, third-person narrator and advocated a more indirect point of view whereby the author shows characters, actions and emotions to the reader rather than telling him/her about them. In this way, James believed that a greater illusion of reality is created than if one were to present a story from one point of view or through one character. The ultimate worth of the text is decided by the reader: the ultimate test is whether the reader likes or dislikes the text.

The founder of modern theoretical and critical practice is the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Coleridge established three important principles:

- Literature is opposed to the works of science as it aims at pleasure and aesthetic unity rather than truth.
- Images chiefly represent the feelings of the author.
Great literature is built not only on fancy but also on imagination; relying on the ability to combine images from the world to create extended metaphors and allegories, it also fuses those images into a single image or feeling.

Universities largely ignored what Coleridge said and continued to teach literature by explaining the language of very old texts or trying to find evidence of the author’s life or culture in them. It was not until the advent of the New Critics in the 1920s and 1930s that Coleridge’s influence came to be felt: there is indeed a great deal of Coleridge in New Criticism.

New Criticism professionalised literary study. Its focus on the text as a verbal icon and its distinctive method of explication or “close reading” have proved invaluable tools to literary critics ever since its inception. New Criticism is the first theory to be presented in this website. It can, although it does not necessarily need to be, applied to all the texts in the website.

Reading literature and literary theory allows us to alter our perspectives and extend the limits of our horizons. Literature preserves the most essential human truths. Literary theory enables us to discover and unlock these truths. Literary criticism allows us to share our new knowledge with others and is a pre-condition for continued enjoyment and appreciation of works of literature.

What are the hallmarks of a good critic? S/he must be able to experience the state of mind relevant to the work s/he is appraising. S/he must be capable of distinguishing experiences from one another, i.e. differentiating between their deep and superficial features. And s/he must be a good judge of values. These hallmarks apply irrespective of genre. To be a good critic, you must be sensitive to the special features of the different genres. Following are a few distinctions to bear in mind. You are encouraged to consult other secondary sources when considering the special qualities of the various genres.

**Poetry**

Poetry employs its own special diction, i.e. words, phrases, sentence structure and imaginative/metaphorical language. These are not part of the ordinary discourse of the time and sometimes serve to distinguish a poet from others of the same period. By the eighteenth century, poetic diction came to mean poetic language written for the educated classes. Elevated genres such as the epic, ode and tragedy required a refined diction in order to match style with content. A special diction was required for descriptive poems and pastorals in order to elevate their “lowly” content to the level of elegance required in poetry. The romantics, and particularly William Wordsworth, challenged the idea that there is an essential difference between the languages of prose and poetry. As already pointed out, Wordsworth believed that ordinary, everyday language can also be the language of poetry. The debate continues to this day. The literary critic, particularly if s/he is a New Critic or a deconstructionist, must pay special attention to poetic diction; even its absence is of significance.

**The literary essay as a genre**

An essay as a literary genre is to be distinguished from the essay you will write. It is a discussion in prose of a particular idea, matter or cultural feature. Its aim is to persuade the reader to accept a particular point of view. It is not an academic text that follows rigid rules;
rather, it is directed to a general audience. An essay may be formal or informal. The formal essay writer writes in an authoritative and disciplined manner and uses an impersonal style. The informal essay writer addresses topics of an everyday nature and employs a more personal style. The literary critic must pay special attention to such devices as anecdotes, interesting and effective illustrations, and humour. Above all, the literary critic is concerned with the rhetorical devices employed to persuade the reader. All the theories presented in this website can make a valuable contribution to understanding why such devices have been employed, and to what effect.

Drama

Drama refers to works designed specifically for performance in a theatre. Above all, the drama critic is concerned with analysis of the dialogue, and with stage directions. Drama may be poetic, i.e. the dialogue is written in verse, usually blank verse or verse of the closet kind; it is designed to be read rather than performed. Drama may also be comical, heroic, melodramatic, pastoral, satirical and tragic. It may take the form of chronicle plays, epic theatre, masque, mystery play, pantomine and folk drama, to name but a few. The twentieth century saw the emergence of a new kind of drama, the “Theatre of the Absurd”. This is represented in the present website by Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.

The literary critic needs to pay attention to the structure of the play, e.g. division into acts, structure of the plot, how atmosphere is created, how stage directions function, and what kind of information they provide. The critic also focuses on the depiction and possible development of the different characters, differences in language between the various characters, dialect, abstract vs. concrete language, and the use of rhetorical devices such as repetition, questions, irony, sarcasm, persuasive words or expressions etc.

Some critics argue that reading is a poor substitute for watching a play. This is not completely true. Charles Lamb, the nineteenth-century critic, believed that actors got in the way of a true appreciation of a play, arguing that Shakespeare’s plays in particular suffered by being staged as there is much that does not come under the heading of acting. While we may regard Lamb’s views as extreme, it is nevertheless true that there are certain advantages to reading as opposed to viewing a play. These include: freedom to form one’s own interpretation, access to additional information that may not appear as part of the performance, e.g. prefaces, notes, stage directions, and the possibility to re-read and focus on important passages. This is particularly important with older plays that use unfamiliar language.

The short story

The short story is a piece of prose with a plot, characters and setting. It may have a theme and employs similar rhetorical devices to those used in the novel. It is different from the latter, however, in that it has a limited amount of space, just a few pages, to organise characters and actions into a plot. It resembles the flash of a camera: it captures a day or an incident. The short story cannot build up to the latter, and may not provide a resolution. There is no space for leisurely analysis of character or event. The novel is more committed to realism than the short story or, to put it another way, the short story gives a heightened sense of realism for a limited period and in a limited context. It normally starts immediately before the climax. The central event reveals considerable detail about the protagonist’s character and life. Edgar Allan Poe, one of the earliest short-story writers and the creator of both the horror and detective story, claimed that the short story has the ability to control the reader’s soul because
its short length allows no interruption or distraction. There is an uninterrupted communion between writer and reader. The short story is also characterised by a singleness of focus which is not present in the novel. Every detail counts in a short story, and for this reason, the artistic ability of the writer is usually more obvious in a story than in a novel. A short story critic must pay special attention to detail, focus and structure.

The novella

A novella is a fictional prose narrative that is longer and more complex than a short story. The approximate length is between 20,000 and 50,000 words (30-75 pages). Derived from the Italian word “novella”, meaning “a piece of news”, novellas were originally stories of town and country life told for amusement or edification. The events of a novella should revolve around a single incident, problem or issue. There are no sub-plots, and the action is usually concentrated to one place. The literary critic needs to pay attention to unity of plot, description of characters and setting, and economy of style.