Literary theory and academic writing

Literary theories offer different ways of exploring a literary text. **It is the text and your response to it that determine which theory or theories you should choose.** You have already made a choice about the subject of your essay. On what was that choice based? Interest? Sympathy with a character, idea or the plot? The artistic beauty of the text? Before being able to decide the most suitable theory/theories with which to discuss and analyse your chosen text, you must know a) what the main concerns are within each theory and b) what it is that you are responding to in your chosen text.

**There is no one right way of reading a text.** There are many possible readings of a text, though some produce more convincing academic essays than others. Readers favour certain ways of reading texts, and all readers subscribe, consciously or unconsciously, to one or more critical theories. Statements such as “that was a bad book” suggest an idea of what constitutes a “good” book. When a reader says that a book is boring, s/he has an idea about what an interesting book should be like.

The focus of the following units is not so much on what texts mean as on how texts construct meaning, and how the critic then reconstructs texts as a consequence of his/her critical response. A number of questions are raised. The object of the website is not to provide answers or suggest definitive readings but to stimulate your imagination and creativity.

When you respond to a text you may note specific linguistic signs, relate to ideas and experiences of your own, and/or find the historical/social context interesting. You are perhaps fascinated by the writer’s or characters’ thoughts, you may feel sympathy with a character that is socially, financially or sexually disadvantaged, or perhaps you are puzzled by the discordant or incoherent nature of the text. Before you can begin to write your essay, you must decide which of your responses you wish to write about. And this is where theory comes in. A theory is a tool which can be used in a variety of ways. The following units present various literary theories in relation to specific literary texts. Before you read these sections it is useful to take a short tour of the various theories presented in this website. These are discussed in order of appearance in the different units and can be referred back to when you meet them again in the ensuing units. The descriptions in the individual units, e.g. “Poetry I” (two poems, New Criticism and Biographical Criticism) are of a more practical nature in that they offer hints on how to apply each theory. The unit in which the theory is explained in detail is given in parentheses after the name of the theory concerned.

**New Criticism (Poetry I)**

The term “New Criticism” was popularised by John Crowe Ransom in *The New Criticism* (1941). New Criticism challenged the prevailing concerns of scholars, who had traditionally been preoccupied with the biographies of authors, the social, historical and economic context of literary works and the history of different literary movements. Instead, the New Critics posited the idea that the real concern of the critic is the text itself. The primary focus of the New Critics was initially on poetry rather than prose. New Criticism became the prevailing method of teaching literature between the 1930s and 1960s.

The basic principles of New Criticism are:
A poem is an independent verbal object which exists for its own sake. A literary work is isolated from its context and effects.

“Close reading” or explication is fundamental to the critical process. The critic analyses the interrelations and multiple meanings of the elements of a text. Attention is paid to images, symbols, repetitions, contradictions, contrasts and other literary devices.

A text is a unity with a message. This unity may be created by opposition, contrast and ambiguity. The meaning of the text is identifiable.

By the end of the 1960s, New Criticism had lost much of its impetus as a critical tool. However, it has left its mark on literary criticism and on the teaching of literature in higher education. Close reading continues to be an important element in modern literary criticism.

Biographical Criticism (Poetry I)

Unlike New Critics, biographical critics assume that there is something “outside the text” and that biographical facts are important in helping the reader understand the text. The ancient Greeks and Romans wrote short lives of individuals. Medieval writers wrote chronicles of the lives and acts of kings. It was in the eighteenth century that biographies began to take the form practised today. Samuel Johnson’s *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works* (1779-81) and James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) are notable examples.

Biographical criticism is based on the following principles:

- A literary work is a personal achievement. If we understand the mind of the author, we understand his/her work.
- Real life experience can help shape an author’s work.
- By understanding the author, we understand the purpose behind a text.
- Understanding the author enables the reader to appreciate the writer’s choice of words, allusions, devices etc.

It is important when studying a text from a biographical perspective that one does not equate the author with the contents of his/her text: biographical context and literary content are not the same thing.

Reader Response (Poetry II)

Reader Response is not one but a compilation of theories. Unlike other critics, however, Reader Response critics do not view a work as a set of ready-constructed meanings that need to be identified; instead, they see it as the product of mental responses to the words on the page. In other words, the reader rather than the author creates meaning as s/he responds to the text, bringing to it a set of expectations and experiences. Since the meaning of a text is the result of an individual response to the latter, reader response critics argue that there is no one definitive reading of a text.

Following is a short historical survey of the evolution of the approach. At the beginning of the 1980s, Wolfgang Iser posited the view that a text is the product of a writer’s intention; the writer controls in part a reader’s responses, but there also exist a number of gaps in a text, i.e. sections without any determinate meaning which must be filled by the reader. Iser minted the
term “the implied reader” to describe a reader who will respond in predictable and intended ways to response-inviting structures; he also referred to the “actual reader,” i.e. the reader who responds on the basis of previous experience. There is thus a range of possible meanings of a text. Some readings, Iser argues, can be identified as “misreadings,” as the author has to some extent already shaped the reader’s possible responses.

According to Reader Response critic Jonathan Culler, readers assimilate literary conventions and rules which enable one to interpret texts; such conventions restrict as well as stimulate the creative interpretation of texts (Structuralist Poetics, 1975).

Critics differ as to how much freedom the reader has in the formation of his/her responses. Harold Bloom, for example, argues that readers employ defence mechanisms to the reading process as they attempt to avoid the revelation of repressed desires to consciousness. There can never be, according to Bloom, one correct reading of a text: all reading is a misreading (See Poetics of Influence edited by John Hollander).

Stanley Fish introduced the concept of “interpretive communities” (Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities, 1980). These comprise groups of readers who share a specific reading strategy or set of assumptions. Such groups will arrive at similar interpretations of a text, as their reading is influenced by common socio-cultural factors, ethnic origins, gender, geographical situation, education etc. Interpretations of a text will vary from group to group; there is thus no definitive interpretation of a text.

The basic principles of reader response criticism include:

- Meaning is created by the reader rather than the author. Reading is a process of negotiation between text and reader. A text does not have a definitive meaning in its own right. All reading is misreading to a greater or lesser extent.
- The reader’s interpretation is steered by his/her environment, education, interests and experience.

Reader Response critics focus on the reader’s activity in one of two ways: they describe how readers should respond, or they give the critic’s personal response.

New Historicism (Poetry III)

New Historicism has been in vogue since the early 1980s. Unlike its predecessor, historicism, it is not solely concerned with the historical context of a literary work. Rather, New Historicists focus on the impact of a work on society at the time of writing and/or up to the present day, how a work has been interpreted during different historical periods, and the historical and cultural conditions of the production of a work.

Whereas New Criticism is formalist, New Historicism is structuralist in approach. The importance of ideology for the New Historicist has its origins in the thinking of the Marxist critic, Louis Althusser. The concern of the New Historicist with power relations in society, the influence of these relations on discourse, and their determination of what will be regarded as knowledge and truth in any given historical period stems from the work of Michel Foucault. One of the best-known New Historicists today is the Renaissance scholar, Stephen Greenblatt.

The basic principles of New Historicism include:
• History does not comprise a number of objective facts; literature interacts with history and must be interpreted.
• A text is a representation, i.e. a verbal formation that is the product of a specific ideology and culture at a particular point in time. These representations reinforce the power structures that lead to domination and subjection.
• A literary text is one of many different kinds of text, e.g. historical, political, or religious and is as such subject to specific chronological and geographical conditions. The literary text is neither more nor less important than any other kind of text.
• A literary text may contain dissonant voices. It may represent orthodox or subversive views.
• A text is the product of interaction with the prevailing culture. It interacts with institutions, beliefs, practices and power relations which together form the context of the work.
• Readers, like authors, are influenced by their cultural/historical context. It is thus not possible, according to New Historicists, to read a text objectively. If a reader’s ideology does not comply with that of the author, he will “appropriate” it, i.e. interpret it in such a way that it conforms to his/her own culture.

New Historicists recognise that they are themselves products of a given culture. In order to avoid appropriating older texts they view history as a series of ruptures. In so doing, they attempt to distance themselves from the text and thereby heighten awareness of differences between the past and the present. The aim is to gain insight into power relations in the text, particularly with respect to social class, gender and race.

New Historicism gave rise to a new field of criticism in the 1980s: cultural studies (we do not study this theory in our course due to lack of time).

Psychological Criticism (Poetry III)

Psychological critics view texts as products of a writer’s state of mind or personality. An early proponent of this view was the nineteenth-century writer Thomas Carlyle. Psychological critics focus on an author’s mental and emotional traits, and the specific consciousness of the author.

An increasingly influential type of psychological criticism is psychoanalytical criticism. Sigmund Freud developed psychoanalytical criticism in the early part of the twentieth century. He argued that literature and all other forms of art consist of an imagined fulfilment of wishes that are denied by reality or forbidden by prevailing moral standards. Forbidden wishes – primarily of a sexual character – are unconsciously repressed in the artist’s/writer’s mind and become disguised fantasies. Such fantasies conflict with the prevailing sense of propriety. Freud believed that a writer uses literature to fulfil his fantasies (see Freud, An Outline of Psychoanalysis, 1939).

Psychoanalysis may also be applied to the reader. A reader may interpret a text as part of a process of negotiation between his or her unconscious desires and the fantasies the author inserts into a text. The psychological critic decodes what is hidden or disguised in the text.

Freud’s ideas have recently been challenged, particularly with respect to the repression of sexual desire, though his theory of the repression of the unconscious is still popular today.
The basic principles of psychological criticism include:

- Bringing to consciousness hidden fears and desires.
- Identifying the reasons for specific actions. This applies equally well to authors, characters and readers. It is assumed that a work of literature is the product of the writer’s personality, emotions and ideas. With respect to a character’s behaviour, the psychological critic assumes that his/her behaviour can be explained psychologically, i.e. in terms of repression, rationalisation (as opposed to feeling and reacting) and denial. With respect to the reader, the focus of attention is on how the reader’s motivations shape his/her interpretation of a work.

Deconstruction (Poetry III)

The aim of the deconstructionist is to subvert or undermine the supposition that language is able to provide boundaries, coherence or unity. The deconstructive critic argues that a text has no definitive meaning: a text is a series of conflicting forces that can be interpreted in a multitude of ways.

Jacques Derrida is the founder of deconstruction. According to Derrida, it is impossible to get beyond the system of symbols that makes up a text; there is nothing beyond the text. Context and/or authorial intention are inaccessible to the reader. The apparent meaning of any text is, according to Derrida, the product of a self-effacing trace, i.e. one is not conscious of it. A text may appear to have a decidable meaning but this is only an illusion.

Derrida’s starting point is that recognition of the signifier (the word) and the signified (its reference) does not form a unity: their relationship is arbitrary and changeable. Contradiction is inherent in a text because words cannot stabilise meaning: if we say one thing we must leave out something else. A deconstructive critic believes that a text always contains a gap or a space that cannot be filled. The choice of meaning is infinite.

Like New Critics, the deconstructive critic attempts to identify an apparent unity in a text. But unlike the New Critic, s/he dispels it.

The basic principles of deconstruction include:

- Meaning is created through binary oppositions in which one element is favoured. The hierarchy of elements is arbitrary and reversible. Unity in a text must be dispelled.
- Texts contain gaps, ambiguities and oppositions that preclude determinate meaning. All reading is misreading.

Marxist criticism (The Essay I)

Marxist criticism is based on the cultural theory established by Karl Marx (1818-83) and Friedrich Engels (1820-95). It rests on the principle that the history of humanity and social institutions is determined by changes in economic organisation. These changes influence the social class structure and produce a division between dominant and subservient classes. The position and interests of a particular class are determined by ideology, i.e. the beliefs and values with which human beings describe the world around them.
Marxist critics see literature as a product of the economic organisation and prevailing ideology in society. A work is assumed to reinforce the existing social structure, or challenge and even undermine it. Marxist critics may even combine both views.

The basic principles of Marxist criticism include:

- A concern for the social rather than the individual. Marxist critics explore the sociology of the text rather than the psychology of individual characters.
- When characters or authors are examined, it is usually as a way of exploring the wider social and historical forces of which they are seen to be products.
- Literature is not only a reflection of established social values and norms, it can become an active agent or catalyst for change. Some literature reinforces dominant values, some questions them, and some does both.

In the last few decades, Marxist criticism has made a comeback after a decline in popularity in the first half of the twentieth century. Critics such as Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson have developed Marxist criticism in different directions. And Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has assimilated Marxist criticism to deconstruction and feminist criticism.

**Feminist criticism (The Essay III)**

Feminist literary criticism has been highly influential in the last few decades. It is interrelated with the political feminist movement and shares its concern for economic, social and cultural equality. It identifies and opposes the different ways in which women are marginalised, excluded and exploited. As a literary theory, feminism was not inaugurated until the 1960s, but works of literature dealing with women’s struggle for equal rights had appeared before this time, e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

An important step in the development of modern feminist criticism was the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* in 1949. Beauvoir critiques the identification of women as the negative object or “Other” who is defined by the subject or by men. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, published in 1969, discusses power relations in society, arguing that in the West, society is organised so that the dominance of men and the subordination of women are perpetualised.

Feminism has developed in a number of directions and, like Reader Response and Marxist criticism, does not comprise a universal or coherent theory of literature. There are, however, certain basic principles that are accepted by most feminists today. These include:

- Western society is patriarchal. Women are subordinate in all cultural areas: religious, political, economic, social and artistic. Women are educated to accept the prevailing patriarchal ideology, i.e. male superiority, and to look down on their own sex.
- Sex is determined by biology; gender, i.e. “masculine” and “feminine” are culturally constructed and reinforced.
- Much canonical literature is written by men and reinforces the patriarchal ideology. Women are depicted as outsiders and thus subordinate.
Feminists are concerned with how literature does justice to the female point of view and values. There are two main schools of feminist criticism: the American/British and the French. American and British critics focus on writings by and about women. They study the themes of these works and how and why women write, as well as how women are portrayed in literature. The French critics, on the other hand, focus on language, which they see as male-constituted and male-dominated. They are concerned with how female language may withstand subjection to the dominant male language, and how uniquely female experiences can give rise to a special, female language.

Selected bibliography

Derrida, Jacques. ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’. In Stanley Fish. *Is There a Text in This Class?*


A short story

Read the following short story, written by myself, and decide which of the above theories would be most useful in discussing the story. Be prepared to explain in class a) why you have chosen the particular theory/theories (you may choose one or two theories) and b) what particular insights would be gained by applying your chosen theory/theories.

‘John’s Return’

John has been planning the trip for months: the tickets were booked a long time ago, he has bought a brand new bicycle with all the latest refinements; and most important of all, Jeanette knows he is coming. Perhaps she is excited at the prospect of their meeting; perhaps she is curious to see what marks the years have left on him. Soon he will know.

The year is 1932, the month, October. John had promised himself all those years ago that if he survived the War he would return and thank Jeanette for all she had done. It would not be easy crossing the Channel with all his gear. From Exeter, his place of birth and his home to this day, it takes many hours by train to Dover. And who knows how long it will take to cycle to Ypres.

John was only sixteen when the War broke out. Just after his eighteenth birthday, the British Government had been forced to introduce conscription as there were so few of the original volunteers left. When John signed up in 1916 he was bursting with patriotism, ready for adventure, and proud to be a young able-bodied man at this historic time. He had also been acutely aware of how his dreams of going to university might have to be permanently postponed. He had always loved literature, especially the Victorian poets, and had planned to go to Oxford to study English literature. “When would the War end?” he had thought many times during his first weeks on the Western Front.

As John loads his bicycle on to the train standing at Exeter St. David’s Station he cannot help but recall his two years at the Front. And as he does so, Jeanette’s face comes back to him over and over again. How sweet and innocent she was. How was it possible that a twelve-year old girl could make the difference between life and death?

All the painful details rush back to him: the sound of the guns, the screams of the men, the feeling that this time he will not make it. He had survived Verdun and the Somme. Passchendale, however, was to be his downfall. It was here that he had lost one eye, acquired an open wound down the right side of his neck, and his right leg had been left hanging – useless and strangely numb. He remembers how he had reflected on the prospect of dying, surrounded in blackness and filth, and by people he didn’t know. He recalls that he had been vaguely aware of the stretcher bearers working their way between the dead bodies. They had given him up for dead. What did it matter anyway? There was no one to mourn him. John remembers groaning and making up his mind to die.

As he pushes his bike into the specially designated area of the train and locks it, he goes over the events leading up to his rescue. He remembers that after what had seemed like an eternity, he was suddenly and very unexpectedly being lifted. Two men were talking, but he didn’t
understand what they were saying. He had drifted into oblivion. The next thing he knew was that he was in a clean and comfortable bed at a casualty station.

The days had gone by and gradually John had begun to take an interest in his surroundings. He could see with his one good eye. And he was no longer in terrible pain. One afternoon he had been surprised by the sudden appearance of a young girl. She didn’t look more than ten years old. She sat patiently by his bed and waited for him to react. The girl, Jeanette, had long black, curly hair and large dark brown eyes. She started to talk to John. She could speak very little English, he recalls. He had been touched by the girl’s gentleness and by her generosity: she had always come with a small gift, sometimes a bun, sometimes an apple, and occasionally, a small bunch of wild flowers. John had liked the flowers best, he remembers.

Jeanette was the oldest daughter of one of the stretcher bearers who had brought John to the casualty station. It was Jeanette who had given John the will to survive. It was her face and voice he had re-called as he crossed the Channel back to his native England on that cold November day in 1917. He knew he would never return to the Front. He also knew that he would never forget the young girl who had put meaning back into his life.

John and Jeanette had kept in regular contact since his return to England. Hardly a week had gone by without their exchanging letters. John had secretly hoped that one day Jeanette would prove to be more than a friend. This was not to be, however. Four years ago, Jeanette had married a young Dutchman. The couple have one daughter, and another child is on its way.

John is determined to re-visit the small village outside Ypres where Jeanette still lives. He will also return to the battlefields of those turbulent years back in 1916 and 1917. He’d heard that the fields of Flanders still bear the wounds of battle: deep craters, twisted and rusty barbed wire, and the dead – the unlucky ones who had been hastily buried just below the surface. John has heard stories about farmers digging up bombs, weapons and other lethal objects. And he knows all about the enormous cemeteries with their white crosses. Those were for the lucky ones who had been given a decent burial.

As he finds his seat on the train, John recalls the last lines of ‘Thyrsis’: “Roam on! The light we sought is shining still/Doest thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill.” Jeanette had spoken many times of a tree in which her father had built her a hide out. She had often come to the casualty station with branches. John recalls how they were a sign of life and of happier, more innocent times. Perhaps the tree has gone after all these years? If it is still there, will Jeanette take him to see it?

On November 11th John will be in Ypres, to celebrate Armistice Day. He hopes that Jeanette will go with him to the memorial service. He counts himself lucky: he is alive, and he has a friend.