

LITERARY THEORY

ideas acting as different lenses to view literature, culture, and art

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BACKGROUND INFO

A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these **ideas** act as different **lenses** critics use to **write** and **talk** about art, literature, and even culture. These different lenses allow critics to **consider** works of art **based** on **certain assumptions**. Those assumptions come from the theories and decide **what particular aspects of** a work are important.

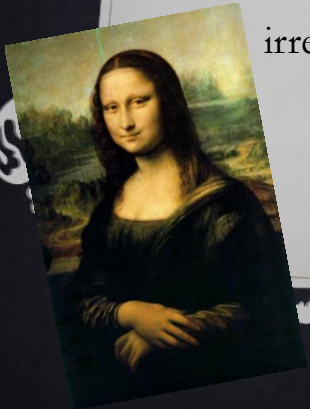
EXAMPLE

- ❖ For example, if a critic is working with certain Marxist theories, s/he might focus on how the characters in a story are created by an economic situation.
- ❖ If a critic is working with post-colonial theories, s/he might consider the same story but look at how characters from colonial powers (Britain, France, and even America) construct characters from, say, Africa or the Caribbean.

ALL LITERARY THEORIES CAN BE CATEGORIZED BY HOW THEY VIEW THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE TEXT

Formal Critics

- ❖ Looks at only the text and how well it is dressed- at the form of the text itself.
- ❖ Seeks a static, unchanging universal Truth within the text.
- ❖ Everything outside the text is irrelevant because it is not static.
 - The Mona Lisa has an enigmatic smile whether one is male, female; young, old; Asian, European.



Cultural Critics

- ❖ Always look at a work as a construct of the society that created it.
 - Andy Warhol's soup cans only mean something if you have grown up in a consumer culture.
 - The song "YMCA" incorporates cultural assumptions that give it one particular meaning
 - A devoutly conservative Christian will have a different interpretation of the song than the producer who wrote it or the Santa Clarita teen who danced to it



NEW CRITICISM

- ❖ A form of Liberal Humanism, the text reveals the meaning of the overall piece through the resolution of some contradiction.
 - Uses themes, characters, and symbols
- ❖ This is a closed system in that the relationship between the text and meaning is autonomous.
- ❖ This theory dismisses authorial intent and instead derives meaning from the text itself.
 - Canonical approach
- ❖ Form of traditional/formal literary criticism
- ❖ It is infinitely teachable.
 - There's a right answer and critical reading skills illuminate that right answer

NEW CRITICISM, CONT.

- ❖ It fits into the broad sweep of a humanities curriculum.
- ❖ The role of the individual response is dismissed as an **affective fallacy**.
 - The misconception that arises from judging a piece of literature by the emotional effect that it produces in the reader
- ❖ Instead, there is an **objective corollary**, that the tension at the core of the text inevitably surfaces through the actions of the characters.
 - Theory put forward by T.S. Eliot
- ❖ The role of the critic is to resolve the contradictions to find the right meaning.



STRUCTURALISM

❖ The meaning of a text is in the familiar structures it employs.

- Based upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure

❖ For example, a rose may symbolize love, or a stick figure may symbolize a person; however, literature has a very specific and important relationship to language.



STRUCTURALISM, CONT.



- ❖ Signifiers (ideas) take the place of the signified.
- ❖ The identity, or meaning, is relational to the system in which it operates.
- ❖ The relationship of one signifier to another is what provides the context with which to extrapolate meaning.
 - Example: Italian Western or Disneyland

DECONSTRUCTION

- ❖ A philosophical assumption that all language is vague.
- ❖ Everything can be misread or making it impossible to interpret anything in a static/stable way.
- ❖ “Deconstruction cannot limit or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must...practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of nondiscursive forces" (328).

- French philosopher Jacque Derrida



DECONSTRUCTION, CONT.

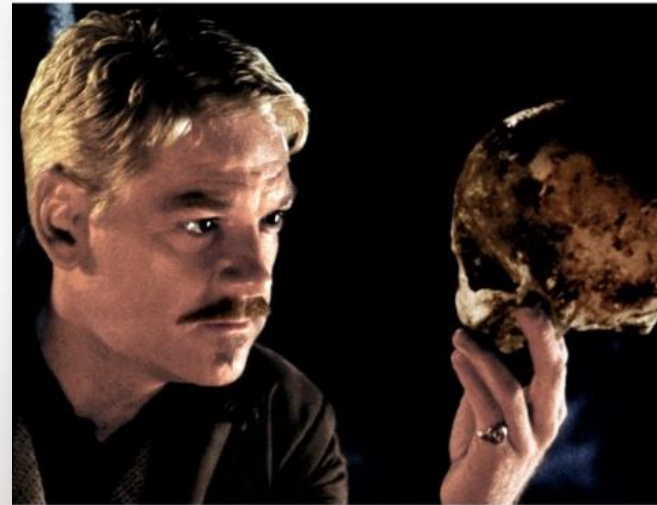
- ❖ A deconstruction tends to be a rather verbose document because it is aiming for the contradiction of showing the imprecision of language with precise language.
- ❖ Almost all deconstructions can be deconstructed themselves.
- ❖ “A theory of reading which aims to undermine the logic of opposition within texts.”
 - *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London: Blackwell, 1996



DECONSTRUCTION, CONT.

❖ Nothing written can really mean what we think it means.

- Example: *Hamlet* where Hamlet asks “to be or not to be, that is the question.”
 - There is no question.
 - “To be” is a transitive verb—it requires an object. So, one can’t just say “to be or not to be.”
 - The final meaning of that passage cannot be what we think it is.



POST STRUCTURALISM

- ❖ Form of cultural criticism
- ❖ Studied by former structuralists Jacque Derrida and Michel Foucault
 - A reaction to structuralism.
- ❖ Connects meaning to culture.
- ❖ Deconstructs signifiers as there are no universal truths, so signifiers/symbolic constructs cannot be relied upon to give meaning.
 - A closed system.
 - Unlike structuralism where symbols, paradigms, and schema are connected to a universal meaning
- ❖ In order to have actual meaning, they must become unstable or else they will simply work to leave hegemonies intact, thus leaving power structures in place.

FEMINIST THEORY

- ❖ The idea that patriarchal Western society subsumes the role of women with the use of language constructs and representations of society based on male viewpoints.
- ❖ Socioeconomic, experiential, and cultural differences do not lend themselves to a universal female ideology, and as such should not be the basis for understanding any piece of literature.



FEMINIST THEORY, CONT.

❖ New language is needed to express feminist viewpoints.

- Renders patriarchal hierarchies and ideologies impotent in literature.

❖ Began as an opposition to male critical theory

- Tended to follow patriarchal formula



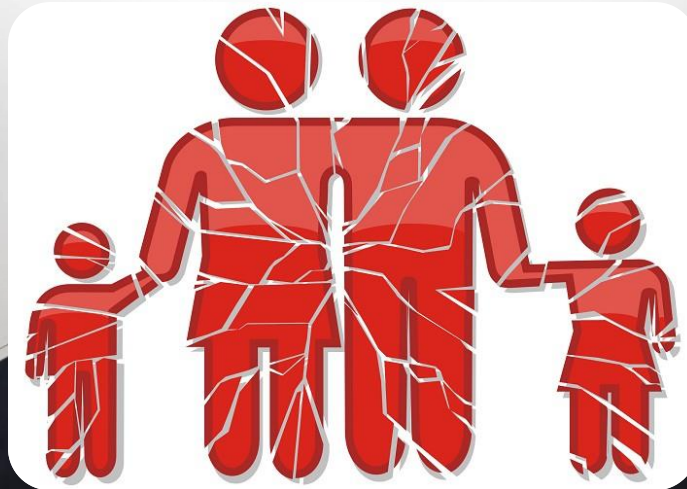
FEMINIST THEORY, CONT.

- ❖ In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf posited a hypothetical sister to Shakespeare, who, given the same conditions, would write works **as good** as Shakespeare’s.
- ❖ More recent feminist critics have posited a female voice that **fundamentally differs** from the male voice and which **does not seek the validation of male theory**.



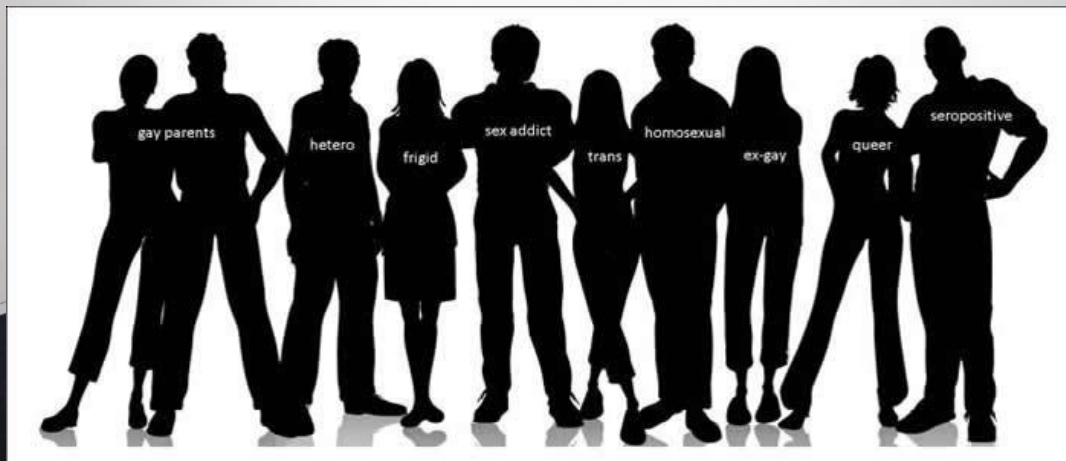
GENDER/QUEER THEORY

- ❖ Opens discourse surrounding cultural binaries and binary oppositional language.
 - father/mother, man/woman, masculine/feminine
- ❖ Differs from feminist theory that looks upon woman as “Other”



GENDER/QUEER THEORY, CONT.

- ❖ Cultural ideology at the base of gender and sexuality is ever-changing.
- ❖ Ideas regarding gender and sexuality should not remain static.
- ❖ In order to remain in flux, hegemonic ideologies and marginalization of gender/sexuality roles must also remain in flux.



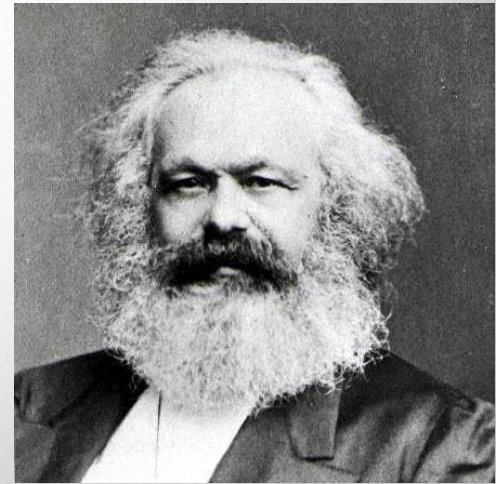
MARXIST THEORY



- ❖ Tend to focus on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinctions.
- ❖ Use traditional techniques of literary analysis but subordinate aesthetic concerns to the final social and political meanings of literature.

MARXIST THEORY, CONT.

- ❖ Champions authors sympathetic to the working classes and authors whose work challenges economic equalities found in capitalist societies.
- ❖ Theories arising from the Marxist paradigm have sought new ways of understanding the relationship between economic and cultural production as well as literature.



MARXIST THEORY, CONT.

- ❖ Marxist analyses of society and history have had a profound effect on literary theory and practical criticism.
- ❖ Most notably in the development of “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism.”



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY-- HYBRID



- ❖ Made popular by Homi K. Bhabha
- ❖ Suggests that a culture can never return to its pre-colonized ways.
 - A culture does not stay, or become, stagnant because it has been colonized.
 - An idea Western culture places upon other cultures.
- ❖ Instead, cultures merge and become part of the colonized culture.
 - The result of a colonized people adapting to survive under new culture rules.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY— HYBRID, CONT.

❖ In order to survive, cultures mimic things such as clothes, music, education, and food.

- In turn makes the “other” become more like the colonized.

❖ Although a mimic is almost the same, but not white, the “other” starts to become more like the dominant culture as it shakes the confidence in the colonizer’s ideas of their own universal truth, thus destabilizing colonialism itself.



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY-- NEGRITUDE



- ❖ Coined by Aimé Césaire.
- ❖ Purports that black people from all over the world share a collective personality that is different from that of European personality.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY— NEGRIITUDE, CONT.

- ❖ Calls for pride in one's culture and independence from European “barbarians.”
- ❖ Leaders of this movement rejected the “savage” tag and exposed the savagery of the colonists.



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY— NEOCOLONIALISM

❖ Splitting the profits between local oligarchs and colonial powers updates the ravages of colonialism.



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY-- ORIENTALISM

- ❖ Theory put forward by Edward Said.
- ❖ The West has come up with ideas about the orient in an attempt to describe and distance it from Western ideas.
- ❖ If Orient is lazy and cruel, the West is produced as hard working and kind.
- ❖ It shows how the West, in its construction of the Orient, allows for Western ideas to be seen as universal truths.



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY— ORIENTALISM, CONT.

- ❖ By making these truths right and natural, it makes the Orient into the “other.”
- ❖ It also justifies the colonization of the people.
- ❖ The colonized may not have been physically colonized, but colonized by being “studied.”
 - Being the object of something someone else sought to understand.



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY-- SUBALTERN

❖ The idea that a people without power, can actually be speaking for the system of ideologies put in place, which may or may not be their own beliefs.

- Can be speaking out for themselves or speaking for groups.



POSTCOLONIAL THEORY— SUBALTERN, CONT.

- ❖ Marginalized “others” do not have access to imperial colonialist’s experience and culture.
- ❖ “Others” operate within the confines of the oppressive group.

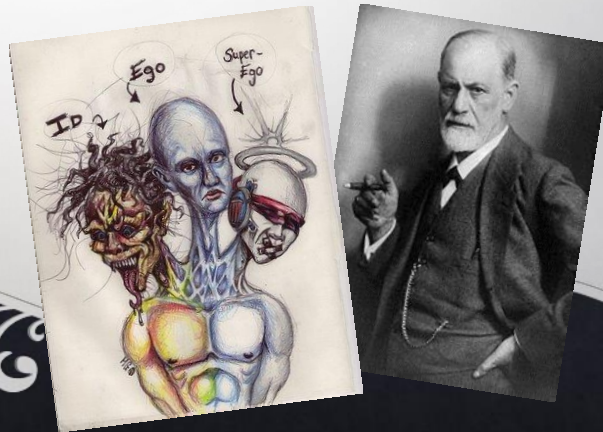


POST ANALYTIC THEORY

❖ Prompted by Freud's work focusing on the Id, Ego, Superego, Desire, the Unconscious, and Defenses.

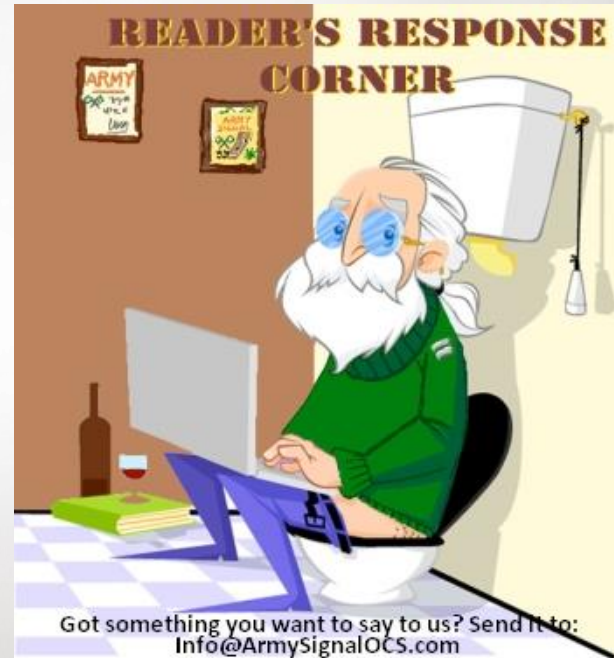
- A broad spectrum of viewpoints inhabit this theory.

❖ One can understand the text by psychoanalyzing motives, characters, symbols, actions, or any number of literary devices in order to discover meaning.



READER RESPONSE

- ❖ The text is completely subjective and authorial intent means nothing.
- ❖ Meaning is discovered through the reader's reaction to what they have read, or the relationship between the reader and the text.



READER RESPONSE

❖ Each reader may bring a different interpretation based on his/her ideology and experience.

