

# LITERARY THEORY: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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## CHAPTER 1

### WHAT IS 'LITERARY THEORY'?

Chances are, if you've picked up this book and are reading this introduction, you already have some conception about 'literary theory,' and you want to know more. You've come to the right place. I teach a course at the University of Colorado called 'Introduction to Literary Theory,' and this book comes out of that class. It's meant for anyone who has heard of poststructuralism or postmodernism, or Derrida or Foucault or Lacan, and has wondered what those words mean or who those people are, and why they are important. It truly is a 'guide for the perplexed,' an attempt to help you out of the dark tangles of theoretical doublespeak and into a world where the ideas of 'theory' begin to make some sense.

This book is for those who know enough to be 'perplexed' by literary theory, and, to put it bluntly, for those who are frightened of it. The students who appear in my class on the first day certainly are. The course is required for all English majors, and we (the faculty) want students to take it in the first or second year of college, so that they are familiar with using these ideas and frameworks when they reach their advanced literature courses. But most students put it off until their final year because they've heard that the course is really difficult, that it's more about abstract philosophy than about literature. They're scared that they won't 'get it,' and they don't even know what 'it' is.

I start my course by asking students, on the very first day of class, what they think a course called 'Introduction to Literary Theory' is going to cover. I get responses ranging from 'I have absolutely no idea' to 'it's going to introduce us to theories about literature,' which amounts to the same thing. It's an unfair question, like asking you to tell me the plot of a book you haven't yet read. That's also the

problem with the title of this chapter: 'What is Literary Theory?' We can try to come up with some basic definitions, and perhaps agree upon some sets of principles or rules that these theories use in analyzing literature – but we'll probably end up with ideas that are too vague and confusing to be of any real use. It's hard to say what 'literary theory' is until you already know something about what we mean when we say 'literary theory.' So this chapter asks a question we won't really answer.

Once we've established that we can't yet say what 'literary theory' is, I ask my students if they've ever read a work of literature. As you might imagine, everyone's hand goes up – after all, they are English majors! Of course they've read a work of literature! Most of them laugh at the question. But the laughter stops when I ask the next one: 'How did you know?'

We know some works qualify as 'literature' and some don't; not every printed book is 'literature.' If you go into a bookstore, probably there will be different sections organizing the books, and one of them will be something like 'Literature,' or 'Fiction and Literature,' which differentiates the category of 'literature' from all other kinds of printed texts. So what's the difference? What makes a text suitable to be placed in the 'Literature' section and not in, say, 'Self-help' or 'History'?

This gets us into a discussion of what we mean by 'literature,' and we start listing ideas in order to see how slippery a category 'literature' becomes when you try to pin it down. Is 'literature' confined only to fiction, drama, poetry, and essay, or can other kinds of writing qualify? Does it have to be written down? Printed? Published or shared? How do the bookstore workers know what books to put in the 'literature' section?

Most books say somewhere what category they fall into: on the back cover or on the copyright page there will usually be a Library of Congress or British Library listing that tells librarians and bookstore workers where the book should go. But who decides the category in which any book will be placed? On what basis, according to what criteria? Getting frustrated by the lack of definitive answers to these questions, you might point out that you know what books are 'literature' because someone in authority, usually a teacher, has told you that these are the books that are worth reading and spending time discussing. 'Literary' texts, perhaps, have more *value* than other kinds of texts. But then of course we have to talk about what we mean by

'value.' Is Shakespeare more 'valuable' than a plumbing manual? How do we decide what 'value' a text has? What is the 'value' of the texts we call 'literary'?

You might think of the touchstones that supposedly differentiate 'good literature' from mere fiction: that literature has withstood the test of time, that it speaks to all generations, and tells universal truths about human nature. I like to point to a scene in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, which came out in 1986. Captain Kirk and Mr Spock have traveled back in time from the twenty-third century to the late twentieth century (in order to save their civilization from certain destruction, of course) and are riding on a bus in San Francisco. They see passengers reading Danielle Steel and Harold Robbins, and Spock turns to Kirk and whispers, 'Ah. The classics.' This line always gets a big laugh. How can the schlock supermarket fiction of our time be thought of as 'classic literature' in the future? This scene tells us, however, that what we judge as 'valuable' 'literature' now might not be immutable and timeless, because standards of literary value and evaluations of literary excellence change over time.

The point of all of this is not to come up with some agreed-upon definition of 'literature,' nor to list all the ways we have of distinguishing 'literature' from other kinds of texts. Rather, I want my students – and you, my readers – to see that we all have assumptions about what makes literature 'literature.' These assumptions, whatever they might be, constitute our theories about what literature is, what it does, and why it's important.

In this sense, 'literary theory' isn't something you learn, it's something you become aware of. You already have a theory, or several theories, about literature, but you may have never thought about them or articulated them. And that's pretty much what this book is about: working to articulate, to understand, some of the basic assumptions we have about the category we call 'literature,' and about how a 'literary' text is – or isn't – different from any other kind of text.

Literary theories have existed as long as literature has. 'Literary Theory,' with the capital letters, points to sets of ideas that have greatly influenced the way we have thought about, taught, and produced scholarship on 'literature' within colleges and universities in the past 30 to 40 years. 'Literary Theory' is a big umbrella term that covers a variety of approaches to texts ('literary' or not); if these approaches have anything in common, it is that all of them examine factors that shape how a text is written and how we are able to read

it. 'Literary Theory' comes from all kinds of disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, history, economics, gender studies, ethnic studies, and political science; much of what falls under the heading 'Literary Theory,' as you'll see, has little to do directly with what we think of as 'literature.'

Since it seems difficult to come up with a precise definition of 'literary theory' as a single graspable entity, perhaps we need to ask a different question. Why is 'literary theory' something important for students of literature to know? Why is 'literary theory' considered a necessary and valuable part of a literary education?

By way of answering this, let me tell you about my own experiences with 'Literary Theory.' I was an undergraduate English major from 1976 to 1980, just at the point when literary studies was shifting radically as a scholarly discipline. As an English major, I learned some essential skills, particularly that of close reading – learning to read a text carefully, word by word, in order to answer the question 'Why did the author choose this particular word, phrase, sentence structure, paragraph structure, image, symbol, meter, rhyme, etc.?' We started with the often-unstated assumption that every element of a poem, story, play, or novel had a purpose and a reason for being there, and that our job as students, as future literary critics, was to figure out that purpose and name those reasons. So I learned the technical skills for reading poetry, for example, recognizing metrical forms, being able to detect variations in meter and rhythm, and to extract some meaning from those variations; I learned the history and development of poetic and prose styles and forms, so that I could recognize what time period a work came from, and understand the conventions of that period or style or form.

In fact, I learned two old styles of being an English major. At my college in the USA, I learned how to do close readings of texts, to form my own opinion, give my own interpretation, in answering the question 'Why is this here?' In doing so, I learned skills of argument and explication, writing essays that had a clear thesis and strong supporting evidence taken directly from the text itself. Then, as part of my major, I spent six months at University College London doing the first-year English curriculum. This curriculum was organized very differently than my US English major. I attended lectures on seventeenth-century English literature, and met weekly with a tutor who assigned an essay topic relevant to the lectures, which I then pre-

pared for the next week's tutorial. My tutor always asked me to research what literary critics had said about a particular work; my essay was to summarize what I found and offer some critique of the critics' opinions, either agreeing or disagreeing with someone else's viewpoint.

In the US major, I read nothing but original literary texts, and wrote about what I found there; in the UK major, I focused on reading what critics had said in order to be able to read the original literary text more carefully. In neither major did anyone ask me to ask *why* these skills and pursuits were valuable or important, or to think about anything outside of the literary text and its history and criticism. While my UCL tutor was impressed by my ability to have original thoughts and interpretations of literary texts (due to my US training), my US professors were impressed, on my return, by my thorough knowledge of literary history and criticism, something which had been made secondary, in my college's major, to the perfection of skills in close reading and argumentation.

And then I got to my senior year, spring of 1980. Just a few weeks before my graduation, I went into a bookstore and bought two recently published works in my field of interest, which was women writers and feminist literary criticism. The first was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*; I took it home and read it avidly, feeling delighted that I had received an education solid enough to enable me to understand their arguments about 'the anxiety of influence' and about British literary history and the difficulties faced by women authors in the nineteenth century. The other book, however, baffled me. It was *New French Feminisms*, a collection of essays by feminist theorists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Though the essays were in English, they might as well have been in a totally foreign language, as they talked about the Phallus and the Symbolic and the category 'woman.' I had no idea what they were talking about, or even what perspective or premise they were writing from. After ten pages, I threw the book across the room, yelled several expletives, and declared, 'I've been studying all the wrong things!'

And in some ways I had been. I had been studying 'literature': classical works of proven timeless value, their history, and what important critics had said about them. The authors of the essays in *New French Feminisms* were examining language, gender, and the unconscious; they were making references to Freud and Marx, to

anthropology and linguistics, and to people I'd never heard of, like Lacan and Derrida.

This was a world-shattering – or world-view-shattering – moment in my intellectual life. I suddenly saw a world of thought of which I knew absolutely nothing, a realm of ideas which illuminated how 'literature' worked, but which my English major training had never mentioned. I didn't know it at the time, but I was experiencing the disorientation and confusion that my whole generation of literary scholars would go through in the next ten years, as the old methods of literary study were expanded and challenged (though never fully replaced) by this new thing called 'Theory.'

In graduate school, I encountered my first formal courses in 'Theory,' and even then they were partial and underdeveloped. I fought my way through Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault (without, I have to add, the benefit of any guidebooks like this one!) in the years when these thinkers' works were gaining attention in US academic circles, and their works were being translated into English and taught (albeit selectively and sometimes reluctantly) in university classrooms, at least at the graduate level. Slowly, painfully, I began to get a glimmer, first of what these theorists were actually saying (since 'deciphering' their dense theory-speak was like learning a foreign language itself), and then of why they were saying it, and what their assumptions and premises were. By the time I completed my doctorate, I was fairly fluent in 'theorese,' and by then a familiarity with the various branches of 'Literary Theory' had become a requirement for professional employment in an English department.

I'm telling you this to reassure you that I remember very vividly what it's like not to know 'Literary Theory,' and to find its intricacies perplexing and frustrating. I'm also telling you this as part of explaining why 'literary theory' is so ubiquitous in literary studies in the early decades of the twenty-first century. It's because of people like me, who were assaulted by the radical shift in the ways we thought about, talked about, and approached literature, from literary history and close reading to formulating ideas about texts based on theories 'outside' of literature, like linguistics and psychoanalysis. It's also because of a generational political awareness: the theorists like Foucault and Derrida, whose works have become the cornerstones of literary theory, were formulating their ideas in the context of the radical politics of the 1960s, in the USA as well as in Europe; the intellectuals and academics who began to read and

teach their works in the USA in the 1970s were also products of that same political period. Their students, like myself, inherited many of the concerns of the 1960s, including political awareness of inequalities of race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and the like, and these concerns, as articulated and addressed within the theoretical frameworks we were studying, became part of the questions we asked of literary texts in doing literary analysis.

So what do we do when we use literary theory these days? Well, I used to ask 'Why is this word here?' in analyzing a poem or story. Nowadays I still start with 'Why is this word here?' but my answers have more to do with 'What does this word do, how does it function, what does it produce?' than with 'What does it mean?' I still base my readings of literature (and of every other kind of text) on the skills of close reading I learned – that part of literary studies seems to me essential – but I no longer stop asking questions when I've explicated a passage of text and understood its grammar and imagery. I now spend more time asking 'What does this word/image/text do?' than asking 'What does it mean?'

I like thinking about literature as 'doing' something, rather than just 'being' something; it helps me understand literature as part of a larger world, rather than as a self-contained unit removed from real life. Literary texts, like all other kinds of texts, produce the world we live in, and 'Literary Theory' is a tool – or, better, a set of tools – which enables us to examine *how* that happens.

I want to bring up one more question about 'Literary Theory' in today's university curriculum before we move on to talk about what these theories actually say and do. When I was in graduate school, I was on a panel of professors and students who were making a pitch to wealthy alumni to make donations to the university; I was there to speak about the value of the English department, and I talked about how studying literature puts one in touch with core human values, and makes one a better person – standard rhetoric which I had learned as an undergraduate and which was what most of the audience, I suspect, expected to hear from a student defending her chosen field. But one man raised his hand and asked, 'What do you make? What's your *product*?' This question left me speechless. I could see his point: the engineering department makes engineers, who make stuff – bridges, electronic circuitry, space capsules. But the English department? What do we make? What do we produce? Somehow the answer that we make enlightened

educated human beings seemed inadequate to the scope of the man's question.

I've spent many hours chewing on this question. I start, of course, by questioning the question: Why does the English department, or any university department, have to 'make' anything besides educated people? What kind of world-view prompts the questioner to assume that every discipline or department has to 'produce' something tangible or measurable? Part of what literature, and the humanities in general, is supposed to do is to foster the intangibles, the immeasurable values of life, the beliefs and forms of art without which life would be lifeless equations and bare facts. The humanities traditionally house the values that make life worth living, that make existence more than mere material survival and progress, that by definition can't be measured or quantified. But the man's question still echoes for me: in a world ruled by monetary economic concerns, what do English professors get paid for? What do English majors buy with their tuition? And how do we understand ourselves as part of an economic system that needs to persuade wealthy donors that they should give their money to us?

What my knowledge of literary theory tells me, 25 years after my college English major, is that my English department does indeed make something, produce something. Every academic department does: we make knowledge. Specifically, in the English department we produce knowledge about literature, in culturally sanctioned forms like essays of literary criticism and books of literary history – and theory. So what is this knowledge? Who makes it, who evaluates it, who uses it, and for what? Why is the study of literature still something that the university and its donors, the students and their tuition-paying parents pay for?

These are the kinds of questions that 'Literary Theory' helps us answer. We will still – probably always – be concerned with close reading and asking of a text 'What does this mean?' but we will also be concerned with 'How does it mean, what does it produce, and what effect does that have on us and on our world?' That's what 'Literary Theory' ultimately is about.

And that's why it's important to understand. Not just because your teachers think you ought to know this, but because these theories illuminate some basic assumptions we have about the world, and illuminate some of the basic mechanisms that work in our world to generate what we call 'meaning' – which is not limited to a 'liter-

ary' text. What we call 'Literary Theory' really ought to be named something like 'world theory' or just 'how things work,' because the theories that explain how meaning is made and what it produces are theories that explain how our everyday world works. And that, it seems to me, is something worth knowing.

So, at the end of the first day's class I tell my students to hold on! Be prepared to have your mind blown, to question everything, to enter into a world-view, a way of thinking, that will feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar at the least, and possibly profoundly disturbing. You're about to enter a perplexing landscape of ideas which will help you see things as you've never seen them or thought about them before. But relax. You have an experienced guide with you. I've taught 'Literary Theory' to about a thousand students over the past ten years, and every single one of them survived – and, I hope, understood.