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## Understanding Theory, Literary Theory and Literary Criticism

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### Abstract

The term theory derives from the Greek word *theorein*, meaning 'to look at.' The word theory provides the reader with a set of frameworks through which they would be able to analyse the world around them. The term theory has been appropriately described as an amalgamation of intellectual history, morality, philosophy, social beliefs, etc., studied together but not following a perspective of literary productivity. Further, a literary theory acts as a tool for the readers to analyse and understand a work of literature. A Literary Theory enables the readers to understand the relationship between author and work and to analyse the thematic aspects within the texts. Whereas, in Literary Criticism, a critic conveys the appeal, relevance and importance of a literary work to the readers. Here, the term criticism means explanation, elucidation, evaluation, assessment, discussing positive aspects of a work of literature and co-relating one work with another work of literature. This paper aims to study the significance of the understanding of the terms theory, literary theory and literary criticism. Through the practical application of literary theory and literary criticism, one can intentionally participate in the endless conversation about the concepts of ourselves, culture, society and the role of literary texts in reshaping the concepts. This will help the readers to understand the origin, need and difference before studying and interpreting a work of literature. This paper also will try to emphasise the significant contributions of classical thinkers, who are now being ignored and considered inadequate beneath the glittering personality of modern theorists.

**Keywords:** Theory, literary theory, literary criticism, criticism, modern theorist

### Introduction

The term theory could be defined as a discipline of general ideas applicable to a wide range of subjects of Humanity. Theories have evolved from the need for the understanding of something. And when we talk specifically about the understanding of Literature- Literary Theories evolved. In terms of literature, when we relate political, cultural or, historical circumstances of the time to literature, then it comes under the area of literary theories. Literary theory is the practical reading of literature that supports various interpretations of any literary work. It helps readers to understand different critical analyse. Literary theory enables a critic to express readers' dynamic responses from their point-of-view, ranging from their various conclusions to their diverse experiences. In most simple terms, theory is the root, and literary theory is the application of theory.

The literature once used to be one, whereas, the theory is divisive and nihilistic and has usually been read in terms of feminism, post-colonialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, culture theories, etc. According to Herman Northrop Frye, the theory has become more likely as an emphasis on finding new words, unfamiliar, foreign words just for the sake of creating an impression. Theory is thinking about thinking and is thus self-reflective in nature. One of the most striking features of a theory is its endless questioning. It only believes in questing and nothing else. It hardly conveys any positive aspect because of its challenging and questioning nature. Further, he stated that art serves no purpose in society. It is neither adding knowledge, nor intellectual value, hence is useless. He stated art is a deceptive and dangerous form.

Study of theory includes works of history, art, philosophy, social history, sociology, anthropology and linguistics. Theoretical works include questions and arguments that are suggestive and productive, even for those who belong to different disciplines.

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Theory can be characterized as being interdisciplinary, analytical, speculative and reflexive.

Two thousand years ago, two prolific philosophers- Plato (428-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC) dominated the area of literary theory. Plato was the most celebrated disciple of Socrates. Plato analyzed works of literature and other forms of artistic imitation from a moralistic point of view. He insists upon the need for strict censorship of immoral human behavior that might corrupt a society. He gained his perspectives on Art and Literature from his theory of Forms. In his work *The Republic*, he said that ideas are the ultimate reality and the depiction of such ideas is only twice removed from reality. He considered the depictions as imperfect copies of the ideas and the art originating from such imperfection would only be more imperfect. According to Plato, art appeared to be unconcerned with morality. Plato's Theory of Forms is one of his most remarkable contributions and an accurate picture of his state of mind.

On the contrary, Aristotle sees theory not merely as a utilitarian tool but as a tool to promote virtue and practical wisdom. The idea of practical wisdom has its roots in ancient Greece. In this, Aristotle tried to distinguish different kinds of knowledge and different ways of perceiving knowledge. It talks about knowing good, right and best in particular circumstances. Plato was an idealist whereas, Aristotle was a realist. Aristotle came up with his *Poetics* in which he talked of the art of poetry. He established his ideas on why there should be no comedy, epic, tragedy, essential elements of an ideal tragedy, etc. His works reflect his idea about literature as a representation of life, a tool to provide insight into human character and behavior resulting in catharsis.

Initially, theorists were acknowledging general ideas that were not primarily literary whereas, literary theorists derived ideas specific to literature based on literary texts. Niccolo Machiavelli, an Italian diplomat, philosopher and historian, belonging to the period of the Renaissance, emerged as a Renaissance Humanist and started addressing the real issues rather than the moral or ideal illusions. During his time, people were making decisions seeking guidance from the Pope of Rome, who emphasized morality and religion. He made the human beings to relook their positions, apart from the perspective of morals, religion, and destiny and this brought the origin of theories. He was very clear in drawing generalizations from experience and historical facts using ideas and rationality, rather than using imagination to theories. He brought a relevance between the literature and life, which was missing, and started interpreting critically giving importance to not only the moral perspective of the time but also to the literary and cultural perspectives of the time. This approach led to the need for a different kind of literature and established the roots of literary theory. He influenced a number of philosophers and theorists including Francis Bacon, John Milton, Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Adam Smith, Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes, John Locke, Montesquieu and others.

Literary Criticism could be defined as an attempt to describe, study, analyse, justify, interpret and evaluate a work of literature. One who evaluates a work of art is a literary critic. The term has its origin from the Greek word *krino* meaning *to judge* and *krites* meaning *a judge of*

*literature*. A critic looks for the philosophical, psychological, and descriptive nature of a work of art and also its functionality.

Following the key functions of a work of literature, that is, to teach and to entertain, there are two distinct ways to know a literary work. One way is to study, analyse and then come to a conclusion and interpretation. The second way is to read, enjoy, spend time with the work, and rise and fall with the actions of the characters. It is important to know a text before discussing its literary elements and applying various literary theories for the purpose of criticism. This enables a reader to express his perspective and to relate to the function of literature in academia and the world around him. Knowing a work of literature and proper understanding of literary theory results in a clear, logical, and well-defined interpretation consisting of proper order and justifications in a uniform and consistent manner rather than in an incomplete, illogical, and haphazard manner. This enables the readers to broaden their perspectives about themselves, the text and the world around them.

After discussing the basics of theory, literary theory and literary criticism, we now know that literary criticism enables a reader to get a detailed insight into a literary text and to understand a work from different perspectives. Thus, it is important to know about the trending literary theories of the current time.

### **Traditional literary criticism**

It has been there since ancient times and is mostly used to describe a work of art and literature. It talks of the author's biography and cultural and historical background. Using the information, a critic analyse the influences of the events, characters, and places which have been shown in the work.

### **Formalism**

As the name suggests, it emphasizes the literal form and literary devices within a text. It examines the formal elements like language and technical skills. It is considered as the highest standard of literature. Shklovsky's concept of *defamiliarisation* is one of the best examples of Formalism.

### **New criticism**

It breaks apart from the traditional method of criticism. It focuses on the study of a text as a work of art, independent of its historical context and author's biographical background. It doesn't emphasize emotional or moral elements: Cleanth Brooks, I. A Richards, T.S Eliot, John Crowe, Robert Penn Warren, W. K. Wimsatt, etc., are considered as the most remarkable critics following the trend of New Criticism.

### **Marxism and Critical Theory**

Marxism is a type of critical theory. Critical Theory enables a reader to interpret a work of literature. Interpretation of critical theory varies from writer to writer but usually is closely related to critique of modernity and modern society. Marxism, being a form of critical theory, emphasizes capitalism and modernism. It questions society and culture and focuses on class struggles. It tries to explore the relationships of domination and exploitation which can be seen in the structure of social life in the form of class oppositions.

### Structuralism

Mostly influential during the 1950s and 1960s and is based primarily on the theories of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It considers language as a system of signs and signification and only could be understood if studied in relation to each other. It examines the underlying structures and draws general conclusions in relation to the individual and the system. It studies language as a close and stable system.

### Post-structuralism

In the 1960s, post-structuralism came into existence as a response to structuralism which considered language as a closed and stable system. Whereas, post-structuralism gives emphasis on the gap between the signifier and signified. Here, the readers' intended meaning has been given more significance than that of the author's intended meaning. It studies both the literary work and the system that shaped and produced the work. Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are closely associated with post-structuralism.

### Postcolonial criticism

It deals with the analysis of power and political and aesthetic relations in countries administered by colonial powers in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Lanz, 2023) <sup>[7]</sup>. It examines colonialism and imperialism, its literary and cultural influences, to give voices to the colonised and marginalised who once had been a part of this discourse.

### Queer Theory

Queer theory is an academic tool which analyse a literary work from the perspectives of gender and sexuality. Having its origin from lesbians, gay studies and feminist theory were established in the 1990s and have been challenging notions of defined and finite identities. It seeks the possibilities of a decrease in difference and inequality in the background of set norms of society. The list of core theorists includes Michael Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky and Judith Butler.

### Cultural Studies

It is an interdisciplinary field of study which not only studies culture in the form of books, music, movies, texts, and art but also considers culture as a way of participation in relation to others in the contemporary world. Initially, Anthropology, Education, History, Literary Studies, Media and Communication, and Philosophy were considered as significant fields of Cultural Studies. Later on, it includes Law, Politics, and Sciences. Its main purpose is to make a reader aware of contemporary cultural issues and challenges. It enables a reader to analyse the production of meanings, and changing nature of meaning due to variation in its context. Raymond Williams, Herbert Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson and Stuart Hall are considered as the significant proponents in the field of Cultural Studies.

### Conclusion

With the advancing literature, from different cultures, and in different languages, it has become important to interpret a work of art critically. This approach will reduce the possibilities of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. It would be in vain to carry forward our own moral, social, educational and political values without knowing the

background of its origin, struggles and changes. The discipline of literary criticism operates both theoretically and practically. The most basic level is the theory part which examines the principles behind certain practices and beliefs. It provides organized explanations, motives and connections with different structures of power, economy, politics and religion. There also is a significant connection between literary theory and a wide range of philosophical ideas. In order to understand the ideas of major thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva, one has to go through the works of great thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. To understand the complexity of today's world, we need to study the mainstream ideas ranging from Romanticism, Symbolism, Marxism, Freudianism, and existentialism. We must also be aware of the unnecessary use of difficult language merely for pretence. This only will result in a lack of clarity and thus refusal of the theorists.

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