

Introduction to Literary Theory

Lecture 1

Hello and welcome to this course titled Introduction to Literary Theory. In today's lecture, we will try to understand what constitutes literary theory, and we will also familiarize ourselves with some of the topics that we are going to cover as part of this lecture series. However, before we start discussing the term "literary theory" we will need to keep in mind that there is no readily available definition of the term that is universally accepted. Therefore, our task would be to analyse the various available discourses about literary theory and arrive at a working definition. We will then go on adding nuances to this tentative definition as we proceed with our course so that by the end of it we should have a thorough understanding of the subject.

Defining Literary Theory

Now, according to the Oxford English dictionary, the term theory means "the conceptual basis of a subject or area of study", and this conceptual basis is understood in opposition to the notion of practice. So one easy way to understand literary theory is to read it as the conceptual basis of the area of study called literature. This can then be opposed to the more practical side of literary studies which deals with analyzing and evaluating particular literary texts. And this is usually identified as literary criticism. So in other words literary theory deals with the broad picture, attempting to give a comprehensive vision of what constitutes the field of literary studies. And literary criticism concerns itself with the practice of reading individual texts by transforming abstract concepts of literary theories into analytical tools. However, in spite of this being a rather neat definition of literary theory, it does not take us very far because for most students of English literature, the term literary theory usually presents itself as a self-contradictory concept.

Here I should like to digress a little and make clear that throughout this course, I would be talking about literary theory as it is usually taught within the disciplinary framework of *English* literary studies. I would therefore request you to keep in mind that I teach English literature in an Indian institute and it is from this location that I will be trying to intervene in the field of literary theory. As we will see during the course of our discussion, the location of the scholar crucially determines the approach to this subject, and so I thought it would be better to clarify about my location at the very onset.

Anyway, coming back to my earlier point, literary theory usually appears to be a self-contradictory term to the students of English literature and there are several reasons for this. For a start, most of the intellectuals that we normally study as part of any standard syllabus of literary theory, are not literary critics. To give you an instance, Jacques Derrida, one of the most common names that we encounter in any course on Literary Theory was in fact a professor of philosophy. Jacques Lacan, another important name, was a practicing psychoanalyst. Claude Levi Strauss, one of the founding figures of structuralism which is an integral part of our study of Literary Theory today, taught social anthropology. Therefore, as you can see, for someone situated within the framework of English literary studies, most of what is discussed under the rubric of literary theory seems to be concerned not primarily with literature but with other things like philosophy, or psychology or sociology or history. Indeed, for someone like Jonathan Culler, professor of English at Cornell University, the two words that compose the term “literary theory” appear to be so distinct from each other that he insists on calling it simply “theory” without the adjective “literary” attached to it. In his book “Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction” Culler defines theory in literary studies as a self-contained genre which might be concerned with

anything and everything under the sun but NOT with the “nature of literature or the methods of its study”.

In Culler’s account, this kind of theory, which originates outside the discipline of literary studies and remains an alien presence within it, is associated with a particular date or rather a decade: the 1960s. I would like to underline this date because in a significant number of textbooks you will find the 1960s repeatedly mentioned as a moment of origin for what we now consider as literary theory. I will have to come back to this date and why it is regarded as a watershed moment, later on, but right now let us move on to another peculiar point about literary theory which seems problematic to the student of English literature.

If you are doing a course on literary theory as part of an English literary studies programme, I am sure you will be struck by the number of French authors that you encounter in your course.

Claude Levi Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous – figures who now form a permanent part in any syllabus of literary theory within the field of English studies --were scholars who worked from within the French intellectual tradition and are in some sense outsiders to the world of English literary studies. In fact, most of their works were available to the English speaking world only after a significant delay.

To give you an example, Michel Foucault’s famous book *Folie et déraison*, which was published in French in 1961, was available to the English speaking world only after a gap four years when R. Howard translated it and brought it out under the title *Madness and Civilization*. However, this 1965 English version of Foucault’s text was a highly abridged edition in which about three hundred pages of the original text along with 800 footnotes were left out. Indeed, the first unabridged edition of the text by Foucault was not available to the English readers before 2006,

45 years after the original was published in French. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's celebrated translation bearing the title *Of Grammatology* was published eleven years after Jacques Derrida's French original, *De la Grammatologie*, was published in France. Thus, as you can see, the very core authors and texts who are studied as part of a literary theory course in the English speaking world reaches the Anglophone readers from outside and only after a significant delay.

This notion of literary theory arriving from outside to the universities of the English speaking world is translated into a devastating but witty metaphor by Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Speaking as a professor of English literature located in England, Eagleton describes how the job of a section of British literary critics was reduced to waiting at the port city of Dover, to receive the latest shipment of theory from Paris which on an average took a decade or so to sail across the Channel separating France and Britain.

For those of us who study literary theory within the English departments of India or other places in the global south like Africa and Latin America, the texts and theorists appear to be even more foreign and the delay in accessing them is much longer. For us, waiting to acquaint ourselves with the latest in literary theory not only means waiting for these works to be first translated in English but also often waiting for the publishers to bring out affordable editions for our local markets so that they can be studied in class.

In what follows, my effort would be to reduce these feelings of alienation and confusion that usually surrounds the concept of literary theory. And I wish to do this by addressing two issues. The first issue is how, what is labelled as “theory” is connected with the idea of literature. As I have said earlier, for some, the general impression is that theory is external to the field of literature—but is that so? Or are they both part of a wider cultural scene which integrally binds

them together. The second point that I want to focus on is how we, the students of English literary studies in India, are connected with the evolving story of literary theory. Here again, the general impression is that we are at least twice removed from the main source of action, waiting first for the European continental philosophers, sociologists, psychoanalysts to come up with theories and then waiting them to be translated in English and subsequently handed down to us in the form of affordable local editions. I think, our location in India might not be as marginal to the evolving story of literary theory as is usually made out to be.

Paris, 1968

But first let's concentrate on the connection between literature and theory and see how tenuous or strong the links are between the two. To do this, we will need to go back to the decade of 1960s. In the month of May in 1968, the streets of Paris, the capital city of France, were on fire. Open battle was going on between graduate students and the police. The ranks of the students were swelled by workers and they were putting up barricades in the famous university area of Paris known as the Latin Quarter, and the graffiti on the walls read anti-authority slogans like "Il est interdit d'interdire", It is forbidden to forbid. Many of the French intellectuals that we had listed a moment ago as prominent theorists of our time, including the two most famous names -- that of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida -- were student participants in the events of May 1968. And it is generally agreed that these events which came to a head in Paris in the May of 1968 have had a transformative influence on how literature is read and theorized. But why were these anti-establishment riots taking place in Paris, and what is the connection between these scenes of violence and anti-establishment protests with how literature is read and theorized?

The Golden Years

The story of the events of 1968 actually starts from after the Second World War that ended in 1945. In spite of the devastation that was wrecked by this war, the years following it saw significant economic growth and all round prosperity, especially in developed capitalist countries, but also in the communist ruled Soviet bloc. America whose economy had got a great fillip during the war years kept growing in the years following the world war. But it was the economy of the non-communist countries in Europe that were most successful, and they were almost completely transformed by the 1960s. The USSR was also faring equally well in terms of economy and grew at a rate that was comparable to the developed capitalist countries. But this prosperity was not just confined to the USA, Europe, and the USSR. Rather, it was a world-wide phenomenon. As historian Eric Hobsbawm observes in his book *Age of Extremes*, between the end of the world war and the 1970s, there was a spectacular growth in world population but there were no mass starvations except as a product of war and political madness as in the China of 1958. This was because there was a boom in food production which rose faster than the population. The average life expectancy also shot up by an incredible seven years.

One of the key social features that characterized the changing times after the second world war was a sharp decline in the number of people engaged in farming. This was complimented by a parallel trend – a dramatic rise in occupations that required higher education. This requirement for higher education in turn was matched by the growing number of families world-wide who, because of the economic boom, could afford to send their adolescent children to secondary schools and then to universities rather than forcing them to go to work early to support the family income.

From the 1960s to 1980s, the student population in different parts of the world multiplied by anything between 3 to nine times. In France alone, the student population which was roughly

around 100,000 at the end of the second world war grew to become 651,000 by the end of the 1960s and most of this increase was in the departments of humanities and social sciences. This enormous rise in student population had profound consequences. Most of these new students were first generation learners and had a very different class profile from the group of social elites who attended universities till the second world war. There was therefore a sense of natural class resentment that most of these students felt towards the university authority which was geared for hundreds of years towards serving only the social elite. This class resentment felt by the students found echo within the rank of workers and so in the May of 1968 we see students and workers building barricades together in streets of Paris to resist all forms of authority, raising Marxist slogans and writing on the walls “It is forbidden to forbid”.

However, these anti-authority anti-establishment unrest was not just limited to Paris. Paris was indeed the epicenter, but similar student revolts were witnessed all over Europe as well as America where it often took the form of anti-Vietnam war movement protesting against the American military action against Vietnam.

These student protests and the erosion of the social status quo that it represented had deep reaching impact in the field of humanities and social sciences, including the field of literary studies. In countries that witnessed the student unrest during the 1960s, the socio-cultural vantage point from which literature was read and analyzed till the pre-second world war era was not the point of reference that was shared by the new students of the post-war generation. This resulted in a breakdown of the meaning making processes necessary for communication. The social and cultural norms which had stabilized the meaning of words and had structured them till recently, were now under question. The old figures of authority who had fixed the meaning were now being dismantled. This crisis of meaning was most powerfully put forward by Jacques

Derrida in a 1966 lecture which later became the essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences”. In it Derrida posited the idea of discourse as a decentered structure which is devoid of any central figure of authority. The meanings of words therefore do not get fixed anymore but in a free play continues to lead from word to word. For students of literature, this crisis in meaning making due to lack of an authority figure was perhaps more clearly stated by Roland Barthes. Barthes in his famous 1967 essay announced the death of the author – the figure who was assumed to be the ultimate authority on what his words on the printed paper might mean. Refusal to accept any authority meant refusal to accept the power that an author might have in controlling the meaning of his words – a central tenet that would inform the school of Post-Structuralist literary theory which we will take up in one of our future lectures.

Feminism and Postcolonialism

The erosion of authority which erupted in the form of violent riots in the 1960s in Europe and America was however not merely confined to the university campuses and streets but was also felt within the intimacy of the family structure. In the years following the second world war, the number of women in the higher education section rose considerably throughout Europe and the USA. Whereas till the Second World War women constituted only 15 to 30 percent of the student population enrolled in higher education, by the end of the 1970s this number had risen to almost 50% in most of the developed countries. So this means that the wave of new student population that we have discussing so far also had a large number of women in them – women who were as disaffected with the authority and with the old established order as their male counterparts. The rise in the women student population across Europe and America was complimented by an equally dramatic rise in the participation of women in workforce.

Such an expansion of the social group of educated and economically independent women resulted in obvious tensions within the family structure which was inherently patriarchal, and within which the superiority of men over women was taken for granted. This tension gave rise to the social and intellectual movement that is referred to as the second-wave feminism – a movement that took up issues of female sexuality, reproductive rights, and position of women in the workplace as well as within the family. And in the field of literary studies, this movement manifested in the form of a quest to find new parameters for writing and reading literature as a woman.

Women were however not the only marginalized section of the society who gained prominence in the changed scenario after the second world-war. Another previously marginalized social group now enjoyed a similar kind of emancipation and foregrounding, and here I am talking about the inhabitants of the vast stretches of colonized area in the global South which gained independence in the decades following the second world war. It started with the independence of the South Asian subcontinent resulting in the birth of two nation states India and Pakistan in 1947. It then soon spread across to Africa, and most of this continent was decolonized during the 1950s and 1960s. There was again a huge impact of this emancipation on how literature was read and analyzed. By the 1960s, the literature produced by authors from the erstwhile colonies managed to carve out a niche in the global book market. In England for instance, the publisher Heinemann started the African Writers Series which brought to the metropolitan readers the works of authors like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa' Thiongo, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and so on – authors who would not be considered part of mainstream English literature even 50 years ago. Also, just as the second-wave feminism gave rise to various intellectual debates regarding how woman as a reader should engage with literature, the new sense of emancipation and

prominence gained by the people in the global south gave rise to a whole new field of theory concerned with how the once colonized subject should intervene in the field of literature. We will talk more about it when we discuss postcolonial literary theory in one of our future lectures.

So as you can see therefore, the world changed radically between the end of the second world war and the end of the 1970s. This meant that not only the context in which literature is studied and made sense of underwent a very significant transformation, but also that the profile of the producers of literature as well as the students who critically analysed the literary texts within the class room setting changed dramatically. The new prominence that literary theory enjoyed in the second half of the twentieth century was therefore a result of students and scholars trying to connect their study of literature with this changed context – an effort which involved redefining the very conceptual basis of literary studies and connecting it with the new streams of thought in the sister areas of humanities and social sciences like philosophy, history, psychology, sociology etc.

One of the reasons that the post-1960s boom in literary theory seemed like an alien intervention within the field of literary studies was because scholars making use of these new theories were challenging the prevalent ways in which literature was being read and understood. However, what we need to remember here is that no matter how alien theory might appear at a particular historical moment, no reading of literature can ever be bereft of theory. Those who portray the literary theories that has emerged in the post-1960s often forget that the existing ways in which literature was being read and understood till that point in time were themselves underlined by certain conceptual basis which echoed certain other philosophical, sociological, and historical outlook. With each major shift in the economic, social and cultural context, we can therefore see fresh attempts to put literary studies on a new conceptual basis that is not only more in tune with

the changed world but also in tune with the changing perspectives in other academic disciplines be it philosophy, history, sociology or even science.

So we need to remember that the reading of literature has never been an isolated practice cut off from other disciplines of human enquiry. Therefore, an attempt to create an inside outside division and place literature on one side and theory on the other does not take us very far. In other words, the significantly changed global context of the post-second world war era might have led to a new profusion of literary theories, but it was definitely not the first attempt to theorise how to read literature.

Romanticism

To give you an example from within the field of English literary studies: near the very end of the eighteenth century, William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, two friends and literary collaborators significantly changed the ways in which literature was conceived, created, and read. This revolution in the field of English literary studies that Wordsworth and Coleridge brought about is known to us as the Romantic movement. But if we look deeper we will see that this reconceptualization of literature had a broader social, political and cultural context. On the one hand this urge to think about literature anew was fueled by the great political and intellectual changes that were brought about by the French revolution. Indeed, Wordsworth was present in Paris just after the most iconic act of the French revolution, the storming of the Bastille Prison, had been performed and a republic was declared in place of the monarchy. The revolutionary political change that Wordsworth witnessed in France had such an impact on him that he sought to express this paradigm shift in poetic form in his autobiographical piece *The Prelude*.

" [...] 'Twas in truth an hour
Of universal ferment; mildest men
Were agitated; and commotions, strife
Of passion and opinion, filled the walls
Of peaceful houses with unique sounds.
The soil of common life, was, at that time,
Too hot to tread upon."

I am sure some of you were able to hear the echo of the events of the 1960s in these lines written about how things were unfolding in the 1790s. But it was not just this political agitation that led a reconceptualization of literature within the domain of English literary studies. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge in their efforts to rethink the very process in which literature is created and consumed also drew inspiration from French philosophers like Jean Jacques Rousseau and German idealists like Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

So as you can see through this comparison, 1960s was not the only moment when English literary studies was opened up to external influences, and theories were imported from other disciplines to arrive at a new conceptual basis for understanding literature. The theory of literature forwarded by the English Romantic movement was in fact equally dependent on the ideas of intellectuals who were neither literary critics nor working from within an English tradition.

Literary theory in the field of English studies therefore does not start with the 1960s. The 1960s is just one of the watershed moments in the evolving history of literary theory. Indeed, from the vantage point of being a student of English literature, we can spot many other such watershed

moments. One of them being of course the emergence of the English Romantic Movement and a new outlook towards creating and consuming literature in the 1790s. Another watershed moment can be spotted at the beginning of the eighteenth century when the English word “literature” started acquiring its modern meaning.

Eighteenth Century

As Raymond Williams notes in his book *Marxism and Literature*, the term literature, which has its origin in the Latin word “littera”, started being used in English from around the fourteenth century. And in its earlier form, which was spelt with a double “t” by the way (*litterature*), it signified someone’s ability to read. So when the late sixteenth/early seventeenth-century English scholar Sir Francis Bacon wrote about someone being “learned in literature” he was referring to the ability of the person to read.

Now, William Caxton had introduced the printing press in England in the fifteenth century. So by the end of the seventeenth century, when printed reading material was available in sufficient abundance, literature had come to signify not only one’s ability to read, but more specifically the practice of reading printed books. Moreover, literacy and availability of printed books were limited to a small section of elite within the society, and the term literature came to acquire this elitist aura. So by the eighteenth century literature was also associated with a certain degree of cultural sophistication. Engaging with literature was therefore a way of gaining as well as displaying cultural values and civilization attainments.

Raymond Williams notes that by the eighteenth century, the use of the word literature also changed in another fundamental way. During this time, it acquired the meaning of imaginative writing and subsumed within it the earlier category of poetry or poesy which had signified

imaginative composition. Now, with the development of the term literature, poetry became confined primarily to metrical composition. It is in this time of change, when literature gradually became the term as we understand it, that I would like to locate the origin of literary theory or literary criticism. Because it is only when certain works started being taught *as literature* that we encounter the growth of theories to sustain it as a field of studies. Interestingly, India and Indian students of English literature played a very significant role in this eighteenth century story of how English literature developed as a separate field of study and how a complimentary field of literary theory developed along with it. This is because India was one of the earliest places in the world where English literature was studied as an academic discipline. So you can see, rather than being marginal to the story of literary theory, we, those of us who teach and learn English literature in India, are at the very heart of it—not only during the moment of its origin but also in later times when India again came to prominence with the rise of postcolonial studies and the emergence of literary theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha..

Before I end today's lecture however, I would like to point out that though I have just mentioned the early eighteenth century as the point from where we would start our discussion of literary theory, our syllabus will actually begin far back in time. This is because ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, like Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus exerted substantial influence on the eighteenth century theorists. These philosophers therefore form an integral part of the history of literary theory as it is taught and studied within the academic discipline of English literature. In our next lectures therefore, we will first discuss Plato and Aristotle and their commentary on the idea of Mimesis – a term, which as you will see, has been crucial in guiding all later understanding of literature. And then we will then turn to Longinus and his theory of the sublime. It is only after these initial lectures that we will be able to start discussing how literature

and literary theory started being studied in the field of English studies from the eighteenth century.

So when we will move to the topic of literary theory in the context of eighteenth century England, we will see how there was an effort to mould the emerging field of literature in accordance to the rules borrowed from the writings of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. This is why the kind of literary theory that we see developing in England between the second half of the seventeenth century right up to the first decades of the eighteenth century is referred to as the neoclassical school of literary theory. And the word neo-classical here refers to a renewed interest in the writings of classical authors of Greek and Roman antiquity.

The interest in these classical authors of ancient Greece and Rome were already kindled in England during the Renaissance. But it was not until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century that we encounter a substantial body of theoretical writings based on the insights provided by the classical authors. Incidentally, the classical authors often did not influence the literary theoreticians in England directly. Rather, they were influenced via the works of French authors like Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux. And therefore in the debates and discussions through which English literary theorists tried to modify and expand, or even contradict, the ideas of the classical authors to arrive at a new understanding of literature, French intellectuals like Boileau often remained powerful interlocutors. So you see, Terry Eagleton's complaint about the twentieth century English literary critics waiting for their intellectual shipment to arrive from France can be extended back to the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. Because even back then, what was going on in the French intellectual circles had a significant impact on the intellectual life of England and the Anglophone world.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, this edifice of neoclassical literary theory was crumbling. The world was changing under the influence of the industrial revolution and the French revolution, and there were also new intellectual currents at work. All this resulted in the new set of literary theories that I have mentioned before as the Romantic movement. So after the discussing the neoclassical theory of literature, we will turn to this Romantic movement and we will talk about the new theoretical outlook it generated.

In our subsequent lectures we will again move forward roughly a hundred years to a fresh set of literary theories that started emerging during the early twentieth century. Here we will deal with how different strategies of reading literature were experimented with by American New Critics, Russian formalists, and German phenomenologists who initiated a school of literary theory that later developed into what is known today as the reader-response theory.

After these discussions, we will move on to a set of lectures that would help us connect literary theory with three major developments that marked the beginning of the twentieth century. We will start with the development that is perhaps least discussed in the world outside the academia, but which has had an astonishing amount of influence within the field of literary theory. Here I am talking about the 1916 publication of the book titled *Cours de linguistique générale*, or *Course in General Linguistics*, which is a collection of notes of lectures delivered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, between 1906 and 1907. It is to this book that we can trace the beginning of structuralist theory which not only influenced the field of linguistics, but also had a profound impact on the field of sociology and literature. In fact, its influence continued even after the 1960s and we see for instance Jacques Derrida taking his cue from structuralist theory in his famous essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences”. The new kind of theory that is associated with Derrida is therefore referred to as post-structuralism.

From our discussion of structuralism and post-structuralism, we will then move on to another major development that shaped the 20th century – the Bolshevik revolution of the 1917. With this revolution Karl Marx's economic theory first gained a major political expression, as the communists took over the reign of Russia by bringing to an end the rule of the Romanov monarchs. However, the Bolshevik revolution did not merely bring Marxism to the political foreground but also expanded it as a field of debate. And this expansion was also felt within the field of literary studies. And throughout the twentieth century, Marxism continued to remain a very strong intellectual force guiding theories about how to read, to analyse, and indeed to produce literature.

The third major development was marked by the 1899 publication of Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* or The Interpretation of Dreams which was a major publication that ushered in the new science of psychoanalysis. From the very beginning psychoanalysis had a strong relationship with literature, and Freud for instance borrowed character names like Oedipus from ancient Greek literature to express psychoanalytical concepts. Moreover, apart from borrowing literary terms Freud also used his insight as a psychoanalyst to interpret various literary texts including William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This strong connection between psychoanalysis and literary theory has continued well beyond Freud, and throughout the twentieth century we have had intellectuals like Carl Gustav Jung, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who have either used psychoanalytical insights to interpret literature or whose works on psychoanalysis have been borrowed by other theorists to explicate specific literary works.

Next we will move to the topic of literature and gender and in this lecture we will try to see how the different waves of feminism have impacted literary theory. But in this lecture we will also try

and move beyond feminism to see how the more recent queer movements have also played a part in building a new set of literary canons and promoting new kind of discourse on literature.

As is common knowledge, the prefix “post-” plays a very important role in any syllabus of literary theory along with the suffix –ism. In fact we have already encountered quite a few –isms including romanticism, structuralism, Marxism and Feminism. And we have also come across the prefix post- in the form of post-structuralism. But we will focus on two more examples of the prefix post- as we discuss literary theory vis-à-vis postmodernism and postcolonialism. From there we will move on to the theories of ecocriticism, and this in a way will bring us up to date, because much of the contemporary literary theory is emerging out of concerns about our shared environment and ecology.

In the final lecture I will try to give a very brief introduction to certain literary theories that have had their origin within the ancient Indian tradition. So here we will be talking about things like rasa and dhvani. These “Indian” theories are not usually included in courses of literary theory within the field of English studies. But it would be great to try and expand the already eclectic field a bit more and make it slightly more relevant to us who study literary theory from within Indian institutes. So as you can see we have a lot of ground to cover in this course, and we will continue our journey in the next lecture by focusing on the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and their lasting impact on the study of literature. Goodbye till then.