
UNIT 1 LITERATURE, CRITICISM AND THEORY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit I want to introduce you to some general concepts related to theory and literary criticism, and briefly touch upon the distinction between them. I also want to disprove some myths, clear a few misconceptions and, try to even dispel the misgivings that may be lurking in your mind about theory. In this unit, too, I propose to chart out the growth and proliferation of theory in the 20th century.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this section I want to talk about some words which you use in literary conversation and writing. The questions I ask are :

- what is literature
- what is literary criticism and
- what is theory

But before you read the following try to answer those questions yourself, and then see if you and I are thinking along the same lines. Do not worry about the correctness of your answers.

1.1.1 What is Literature

Sometimes simple questions flummox us simply because we take certain things and ideas, about which questions cannot be asked, for granted. The question, which appears in the form of a heading to this section, belongs to that category. One of the easy, always known, and, yet difficult to answer questions. Nonetheless let me make an attempt to tackle it and some other related questions.

The term "Literature", as Raymond Williams, with whose work you may already be familiar, has reminded us, is of a comparatively recent origin. Originally, it referred to, as indeed it still does, any written, printed matter on any subject. We still refer to medical "literature", talk about availability or otherwise of "literature" on a subject etc. Earlier it signified something similar. It is from this source that the term,

"literate" was derived. Sometime in the 19th century it began connoting specifically what was earlier covered under the broad rubric of "poetry". As an academic discipline, "classics" and "rhetoric" preceded it. Literature's critical meaning is still visible in the use of the word "literature". Matthew Arnold (1822-88) gave it the final seal of its current meaning in his famous essays. Now in its specialized use it means what poetry used to signify in earlier times. It includes all imaginative writing : poetry, fiction, drama. The rise of the notion of literature is intimately related to the growth of the print industry, when texts were easily duplicated in the wake of the steam-run printing machines during the Industrial Revolution (1750-1850) in Europe. Books became commodities as the capitalist market economy generated a middle class which had the leisure and the literacy to read books. The idea of literature grew along with another allied concept, that of culture. I am tempted to draw a simple relationship between these: agriculture->Industrilization->leisure->literature->culture.

1.1.2 What is Literary Criticism

This too is one of those awkward questions about which I have already told you. When someone asks you whether you like a particular book, a novel, a short story, and you say "yes" or "no" you are on the threshold of literary criticism. When s/he asks you why, and then you attempt an answer trying to rationalize your perception, you are "doing" literary criticism, albeit at a rudimentary level. Similarly, you do film or art criticism. Understanding and interpreting literary experience, even when not articulated can be literary criticism. Now, this can be an amateurish response. Alternatively, it could also be a highly sophisticated, professional one of the kind we generally read in review columns or journals.

English poets and critics whose works you read have battled over the question of the relative superiority or otherwise of criticism over creation: Wordsworth and Arnold, for example. Some enduring criticism has also come into being by way of "Defense of Poetry". You already know of some of these, such as Sidney's (1554-1586) and Shelley's (1792-1822) Essays. The classical criticism of the Greeks and Romans grew around attacks on and defense of the position of poets in a civil society. "Aesthetics" and "Poetics" were terms that were earlier used before the vogue of "Criticism" set in. You can find brief histories of such common words in Raymond Williams's book entitled *keywords*. And then, more recently, "theory" was introduced into our departments.

1.1.3 What is Theory

Let me try to define the term "theory" for you. You can, if you like, make necessary changes.

Very generally speaking, A THEORY (any theory) provides a system by which experience can be organized and made sense of, or at least into something which will be comprehensible.

All theories are constructed against the threat of chaos, which is the absence of system or organizing principles, to make sense of what comes to us, however, provisional and imperfect that sense may have to be. That is the basis of all dogma, religious and political alike.

What applies to life also applies to our experience of works of art. How does a work of art mean what it means? How do we make sense of the work, whether it be a literary, or non-literary text? Under what conditions is meaning produced? Literary Theory, as we know it, owes its origin to human attempt to deal with these issues. Where does meaning lie: In the text or in the mind of the reader? Does the author use

the form of the poem or novel as an empty receptacle, which s/he then fills (impregnates, like the Heavenly Muse, dove like, as Milton says) with meaning? What effect does it produce in the mind of the reader? Does the subjectivity of the reader determine or contribute to the meaning of the work of art/literature that s/he is exposed to? Or, is meaning an objective reality, having an ontological status? Does the reader make special attempts to get at the meaning immanent in the text? You can see that these are clearly philosophical issues. The philosopher asks similar questions about objective and absolute reality whether the tree that I see or touch is the reality.

In their philosophical writing, Hobbes (1588-1679) and Locke (1632-1704) talk about "wit" and "judgement" and illustrate their general theory by referring to (among other categories of knowledge, like History,) poetry. Hobbes says, "In a good poem... both Judgement and Fancy are required... Judgement without Fancy is wit, but Fancy without Judgement not." The eighteenth century philosopher, Kant (1724-1804), had talked about "Aesthetic Judgment" as opposed to "Moral Judgment", and described it as "purposiveness without purpose". Wordsworth's (1770-1850) theory of literature in his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* is as much literary criticism as "theory": the Romantic theory of poetry.

Instead of making a contradistinction between "theory" and "criticism" one can perhaps talk about "Practice" as an antonym to theory. So we often come up with statements like: "In theory this sounds all right. But in practice, it is impossible to achieve". Hence the pun in Aijaz Ahmad's book, *In Theory*. I am reminded of the title of one of Ezra Pound's (1885-1972) books, *How to Read*, which (that is, the phrase, not the book) can be used to define what we understand by theory. As long as we go on talking about how to read we are doing literary theory. Once we start reading a text in accordance with those dicta, we are doing literary criticism.

It might be helpful in this context to recall what David Lodge says. Literary critics, he says, have since the 1960's shown "a much greater intent in, and anxiety about, the theory of their own subject (what is sometimes called, after Aristotle, poetics) than was formerly the case, at least in Britain and America". He further says, "literary criticism has been drawn into the cortex of a powerful new field of study in which all [the] disciplines are merged and interfused, and which goes under the general noun of 'theory'" (p ix). We will examine more of this and also the subtle distinction between "criticism" and "theory" presently.

1.1.4 Contradistinction

By definition then, you can see the difference between what is generally referred to as theory, and what we have always known as literary criticism. Theory, in the context of literature, is the set of broad assumptions about literature, and the function of criticism. When you say, for example, that economic condition of a society, its modes of production, and class system, in any given time determine the literature of that society in that given period of its history, you are making a theoretical pronouncement. However, when you start analyzing any work of art, a poem or a novel of that society and period from that theoretical perspective, you are doing literary criticism. This kind of "reading" of literature is, of course, known as Marxist criticism, that is literary criticism where you have applied the Marxist "theory" of literature. And, you may have done it yourself, without knowing it! "Reading" in this sense is purposive reading, with theory in mind. *Literary criticism, you may say, thus, is applied theory.*

Secondly, or to put the same thing in a different way, whereas the object of literary criticism is any given, particular, literary (oral or written) work, that of classical poetics or contemporary theory is usually generalization about literature. Invariably, it is the second which leads to the practice of the first. This indeed is what scientific method is all about: from the particular or individual case studies to the general; and

then application of the general principles or theory to the individual or particular works.

For some reason, the term theory, as opposed to literary criticism, came into vogue when structuralism and post-structuralism opposed new criticism. In this sense, theory is used to describe a wide range of approaches from the Marxist to the deconstructionist school. But, as early as 1957, Wimsatt and Brooks used the term theory in referring to any broad assumptions about literature, even in the case of the works of classical writers such as Horace (65-8 BC) or medieval writers, such as Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-74). They refer to Horace as a "literary theorist". They also talk about how "Literary theory and criticism received a new emphasis in Italy during that phase of the general Renaissance which was speeded by the western movement..." What Horace says about certain literary works, their relative merit or demerit, is criticism. But surely, he says all these with certain broad assumptions in mind, or even expressed ones. As Wimsatt and Brooks say, "The main thing assumed in the criticism of Horace is the normative value of the literary 'species' (p.80).

But when we talk of theory here, or even for that matter, whenever we talk about theory, what we have in mind is the more recent phenomenon of "doing" theory. That is to say, the structuralist and poststructuralist turning in literary criticism: from Marxism to Deconstruction, from Foucault to the speech-act theory, is an academic phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century. In addition, theory has broken the disciplinary boundaries between various academic disciplines.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION IN THEORY

In this section I try to give historical reasons for the rise of theory in the latter half of the 20th century. Naturally, this history will be *my* version of what happened, which will be coloured by whatever history I have read and heard from others. You should not--must not--take for granted indiscriminately all that I say by way of generalization and simplification. Ironically enough, this kind of scepticism, questioning that I recommend is also the result of developments in theory. In subsequent blocks you will be told about "subject positions", "interpellation" and so on. Also, questions of historiography have contributed to this kind of scepticism. Let me then proceed with my version of what happened in the earlier decades to English Studies.

Until the first quarter of the 19th century higher education in England was a monopoly of the Church of England, and confined to Oxford and Cambridge. These two ancient universities were like all-men-monasteries in the form of colleges. The teachers were unmarried church men and like them students were all housed in the colleges. Ancient Greek and Latin literature, Divinity and Mathematics were the subjects of study. In 1826 a university college was for the first time founded in London opening up facilities to men and women of all religions. From 1828 English was offered as a subject for study and the first English professor was appointed in 1829. However it was English language rather than literature which received the main thrust. The inclusion of literature came about in 1840 when F. D. Morris was appointed professor at King's College. He said what Arnold was to take up programmatically later: The study of English literature, he said, would serve "to emancipate us... from the notions and habits which are peculiar to our own age". He also stressed on "fixed and endearing" values that literature highlighted. This can be taken as the central tenet of liberal humanism with an appeal to high moralism supposedly beneficent to human kind. The apparent absence of political motive or ideology cannot stand a moment's scrutiny; because, both what Morris (1834-1896) said and what Matthew Arnold made a life long crusade were indicative of the threat that the rising working class

forces posed for the traditional ruling class. English was to be a substitute for religion, now that faith had given way to doubt, and religion had all but lost credibility. With its ideological baggage depleted, religion had to be replaced by a new ideological baggage. Hence, Arnold's prophecy that poetry (criticism) would replace religion. We will soon see how Eliot's and the new critics' conservatism and Leavis's appeal to literary values will make last ditch attempts at saving liberal humanism from growing attacks from rival camps mostly from the political left, which had already dubbed religion as the opium of the people. If you want to know more about this you must read such books as *The Social Mission Of English Studies 1848-1932* by Chris Baldick, *Re-reading English* edited by Peter Widdowson, and *The Rise of English Studies* by D. J. Palmer, as well as *The Moment of Scrutiny* by Francis Mulhern.

1.3 THEORY BEFORE THEORY

The theory that ruled the world of literary criticism, without purporting to be theory, was or has been known as "liberal humanism". Here are some of the basic tenets of the creed, which Peter Barry lists in his book *Beginning Theory*:

1. That literary value is transcendental. That is, good literature is of timeless significance; such writing is "not for an age, but for all time" (Ben Johnson had said of Shakespeare). More recently, in the 20th century Ezra Pound has defined literature as "news which stays news."
2. That a literary text contains its own meanings within itself and it does not require any elaborate process of placing it within a context, whether this latter be
 - a) Socio-political
 - b) Autobiographical
 - c) Literary-historical

As critics, the liberal humanists adhere to the approach which insists upon the primacy and self sufficiency of the "words on the page", the black marks.

3. That to understand the text well it must be detached from these contexts and studied in isolation. (Though some pre-theory critics would disagree with such a generalization).
4. That human nature is essentially unchanging.
5. That individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique "essence". The discipline as a whole believed in what is now called the transcendent subject, which is the belief in the individual (the "subject").
6. That the purpose of literature is specially the enchantment of life the propagation of humane values.
7. That form and content in literature must be fused in an organic way, so that one grows inevitably from the other.
8. That sincerity (comprising truthfulness towards experience, honesty towards the self, and the capacity for human empathy and compassion) is a quality which inheres in the language with which literature is made.
9. That what is valued in literature is the "silent" showing and demonstrating of something, rather than the explaining, or saying, of it.

10. That the job of criticism is to interpret the text, and to mediate between it and the reader.

1.4 IMMEDIATE CONTEXTS

The main impulse towards literary theory as it now comes to us, rose in the wake of the modernist movement. As Aijaz Ahmad says, even the "more advanced sectors of English studies during the period between the two World Wars were dominated by four main... tendencies: the practical criticism of I. A. Richards; the conservative, monarchist, quasi-Catholic criticism of T.S. Eliot; some elements of avant-gardist modernism which nevertheless remained much less theorized in the English-speaking countries than in continental Europe; and the then newly emergent 'New Criticism' of Ransom, Tate and others in the United States" (p.46).

The resistance to such exclusivist and technicist (that is emphasising technique), criticism developed in England first, where there was an older tradition of socially conscious literary study. (You must not be perturbed by such jargon and neologisms as "exclusionist" and "technicist" as they are coined from the simple words you use: "exclusive" and "technical". F.R Leavis instituted and led the *Scrutiny* group by assimilating some of the pedagogical strategies of practical criticism; just as this latter, developed and sponsored by I.A Richards, had made special attempts to make a science of literary criticism, and a strong plea for eliminating subjective appreciation of literature/poetry. Leavis's close reading also made an attempt to define objective criteria for literary analysis to displace the aristocratic notions of literary "taste", while trying to locate the new texts of English literature in the larger story of English social life. Ironically enough, the whole *Scrutiny* enterprise has been seen in more recent times as itself being part of a conservative bourgeois undertaking. As I recount later, this is an episode in the history of the rise and mission of English. This history has been encouraged at least in part by the cultural studies of Raymond Williams who was influenced by the Marxist intellectual movement of his times.

Frank Lentricchia who has tried to trace the history of "theory" in his book *After the New Criticism* says, how "By about 1957 the moribund condition of the New Criticism and the literary needs it left unfulfilled placed us in a critical void. Even in the 1940s, however, those triumphant times of the New Criticism, a theoretical opposition was quietly gathering strength" (p.4). Whereas the New Critics concentrated on the text as an autonomous entity, the new opposition tried to absorb the isolated text into large mythic structures. Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) made the decisive break with the New Critical past absorbing scattered dissidence. While carrying out his critical-theoretical mission, Frye made a series of anti-New-Critical remarks, and called the New Criticism "the aestheticist view". The New Critics, he said, behaved as if they were in possession of special techniques, which enabled them to engage in vaguely sacramental activity. He described the activity as made up of cryptic comment and ritual gesture which were too occult for comprehension. Frye's purpose was, as Geoffrey Hartman was to say, to democratize criticism, and demystify the muse. If you are uninitiated in contemporary theorists, and have been reading them now trying to understand their work, you might think "how silly" it was on their part to think that way. But, many students in those decades were in awe of their teachers who taught the New Critical way. They thought of their teachers as people who possessed special knowledge of hidden meanings of texts to which they, the students, themselves had no clue. You may now be inclined to say the same thing about the theorists, especially if you are among the uninitiated. But the actual democratization has taken place in the shape of the large number of critical-theoretical practices you now can choose from. Many

such backward glances during the mid-20th century saw a correspondence between the New Critical practices and the growth and evolution of literary modernism.

A case in point is Eliot, and the highly influential role that he and other modernist poet-critics played in changing the course of English literature and literary criticism. Assessing his own literary criticism later in life, Eliot claimed that his criticism was the by-product of his poetry workshop. His early essays, he said, tried to justify and defend the kind of poetry he and his friends were writing at the time. Truly enough, his early essays, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent", emphasized "impersonality" in art. Simultaneously, when he talked about the function and tools of literary criticism he valued "comparison and analysis", and chided biographical and historical criticism. However, Eliot often contradicted himself. The critics who came to value modern poetry, such as I. A. Richards, severed the text from its context, and called such analysis of poetry without any reference to the poet's life or times, "Practical Criticism". Poetry thus became the dominant subject for criticism. So much so, they returned to the classical tradition of calling all literature poetry. Shakespeare's plays were also looked at as poems.

1.5 FROM CRITICISM TO THEORY

Aijaz Ahmad begins the Introduction to his well-known book, *In Theory*, by saying that "The notable development in literary studies, as these have evolved in all the English-speaking countries over the past quarter-century or so, is the proliferation, from a great many critical positions, of what has come to be known simply as 'theory'". This explosion of "theory" is due to radical disagreement over interpreting almost every social, cultural phenomenon. Whereas social scientists evolved theories earlier in order to tune their investigation to scientific methods, literary critics took their cue from the social scientists. And, social scientists included literature in the broad scope of their investigation. By criticism, then, what we need to understand in the context of pre-theory, is what has come to be known as the liberal humanist tradition. In fact "liberal humanism" stands as an antonym to "theory", though I should think that the former is itself a theoretical position.

Let me explain briefly to you what I mean by this.

Though most of the New Critics were conservative in their ideological stance, many others were liberal humanists.

As early as the 1930s, Rene Wellek and F.R. Leavis debated such fundamental issues as the relationship between philosophy and "literary" criticism in the latter's journal, *Scrutiny*. Wallek pointed out to Leavis his dissatisfaction with the position of literary criticism being carried out without the teaching of larger philosophical arguments and thus in a "theoretical vacuum". What he actually complained of Leavis's reading of the romantics was that Leavis had not stated his "assumption more explicitly" and "defended them substantially" [*Scrutiny*, March 1937, P.376].

The works of all the figures discussed in this section can be found in the collection *English Critical Texts*, ed. D. J. Enright and Ernest de Chickera (Oxford University Press, 1962).

It is perhaps unnecessary to supply a full-scale example of humanist practice, since that practice will surely be familiar to whoever is reading the book.

1.6 THE COMMUNICATION CHAIN

Before I end this unit, I want to draw your attention to an important concept which helps us to differentiate between various theories. This is the "communication chain".

Roman Jakobson (pronounced yakobson) has given us a very convenient structure of the communication chain, by looking at art or literature as an act of communication. It is a tripartite structure which can be represented through the following sketch:

Addresser (Author) --Context--	CODE (Text/message)	Addressee (Reader) --Reader's context--
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You will notice that critics and theoreticians have tended to concentrate on one of the three parts of any given literary work. Though no reading or theory can strictly and exclusively confine its attention to one of the three nodes, it is the accent on one or the other of the three that lends its character to a theory/reading. Some critics concentrate on the analysis of the text itself and exclude all considerations of the author's biography or historical situation. Some others concentrate on the author's life and times; and yet others on the reader's own perceptions. The third almost deny the objectivity of the text, even the existence of the author. Hence such titles as "Is there a text in the Class?" or "The Death of the Author", or "The Birth of the Reader".

1.7 LET US SUM UP

I have in this unit tried to analyze the subtle and not so subtle distinctions between literature and criticism, as well as literary criticism and theory. We saw that :

- Theory i.e. the impulse towards thinking about the act of literary criticism or judgment was always there.
- That there was a time when some critics acted as if they did not use any theory.
- That liberal humanism which is often foisted as an alternative to theory is itself a theory.

I have further tried to trace in this unit a brief history of how "criticism" has given way to "theory" in the 20th century, and particularly isolated those "non-literary" considerations, ideologies, which went into the making of pre-theory criticism.

1.8 QUESTIONS

1. What would your answers be if you are confronted by the question: why do you like a particular piece of writing?
2. What is the difference between critique and criticism? Think about this and write your answer.
3. List some of the critical theories and theorists you have come across. Write short notes on what you think about their approaches.
4. Do you believe that theory helps us understand literature better?

1.9 SUGGESTED READING

Brooks, Cleanth, and William K. Wimsatt 1957 *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, Yale University Press.

Lodge, David. Ed. 1988, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Longman.

Lentricchia, Frank 1989 *After the New Criticism*. University of Chicago P. 1980. An interesting book attacking theory is Peter Washington's *Fraud: Literary Theory and the End of English*. Fontana.

Williams, Raymond 1975, *Keywords*.

UNIT 2 OVERVIEW OF WESTERN CRITICAL THOUGHT

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
 - 2.1.1 Critical Antiquity and Classical Heroes
 - 2.1.2 Plato's Parable
 - 2.1.3 Further Considerations Of Plato
 - 2.1.4 Aristotle
 - 2.1.5 Aquinas, Longinus and Dante
- 2.2 The English Tradition
 - 2.2.1 Sidney
- 2.3 Some Philosophical Foundations
- 2.4 Early Romanticism
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we discussed how literary criticism has become self-conscious to the extent that it is preoccupied with itself, thus giving rise to theory. But is theory peculiar to the study of literature in the later half of this century? One reason why students of literature find it difficult to grasp theory is their general ignorance of the Western philosophical traditions. In this block it will not be possible to explain any of them in detail. However, I will briefly touch upon some of the philosophical foundations of Theory in this unit.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

I am sure you are aware of the commonplace statement that criticism is as old as creation. William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks have said: "Because poets have a strong tendency to form opinions about their craft and to use these opinions as part of the message of their poems, we are likely to find literary theory of a sort as far back as we can find poems" (p.1).

We are concerned here mostly with Western critical thought. Critical thought derives from, general aesthetics which in turn is guided by philosophical debates and ideas* about what Reality is, God, and the possibility of absolute knowledge. In fact, there has always been a connection between philosophical thought and critical thought. There has also been a correspondence between the pagan and Christian concept of the Word and Logos. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. There has been a correspondence between Word-world, and the world and word. Just as philosophers have persistently tried to interpret the Word and/or the world to us, aesthetic inquiry has focused on the literary word.

2.1.1 Critical Antiquity and Classical Heroes

Some very early Greek poets also show an awareness of, or through implication, propound critical theory or practice. For example, when Homer or Milton begins his epics with an invocation to the muse, he is uttering a theory about his poems—namely, that they are written, with the help of divine inspiration. This idea has played an influential role in subsequent critical theory. Between Homer and Plato (c.428/7-c.348/7BC), considered to be the first conscious theoretician of literature, centuries