

# Introduction to Literary Theory

## Introduction to Literary Theory

Key concepts, major schools, and useful approaches for reading and analyzing texts.

## 1. What Is Literary Theory?

| Aspect                | Explanation                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definition            | A set of systematic ideas and methods used to interpret, evaluate, and understand literature.                                                                  |
| Purpose               | Explains <i>how</i> and <i>why</i> texts produce meaning, how readers engage with them, and how cultural, historical, and ideological forces shape literature. |
| Scope                 | Ranges from close textual analysis to broad sociocultural critique.                                                                                            |
| Relation to Criticism | Theory provides the <i>framework</i> ; criticism applies that framework to specific works.                                                                     |

## 2. Historical Overview

| Period                               | Main Movements                                         | Representative Thinkers                     |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Classical (5th?c.?BC – 5th ?c.?AD)   | Rhetoric, Poetics                                      | Aristotle ( <i>Poetics</i> ), Horace        |
| Romantic (late 18th – early 19th?c.) | Emphasis on imagination, the author’s genius           | Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Friedrich Schlegel |
| Modernist (early 20th?c.)            | Formalist focus on the text itself                     | Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson            |
| Post?Modern (mid?20th? c. onward)    | Questioning of stable meaning, power relations         | Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault             |
| Contemporary (21st?c.)               | Interdisciplinary, digital, ecocritical, affect theory | Judith Butler, Jane Bennett, Sara Ahmed     |

## 3. Major Theoretical Approaches

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## 3.1 Formalism / New Criticism

- **Core idea:** The text is an autonomous object; meaning resides in its internal structures.
- **Key tools:** Close reading, analysis of irony, paradox, tension, and organic unity.
- **Critique:** Ignores authorial intent, historical context, and reader response.

## 3.2 Structuralism

- **Core idea:** Language and narrative function like a system of signs; meaning emerges from underlying structures.
- **Key concepts:** Binary oppositions, narrative functions (Propp), semiotic codes (Barthes).
- **Critique:** Tends toward determinism; overlooks historical change.

## 3.3 Post?Structuralism / Deconstruction

- **Core idea:** Texts contain internal contradictions that undermine fixed meanings.
- **Key tools:** Binary reversal, différance, aporia.
- **Representative:** Jacques Derrida.
- **Critique:** Can be seen as overly relativistic.

## 3.4 Marxist / Historical Materialism

- **Core idea:** Literature reflects and reproduces class relations and economic conditions.
- **Key concepts:** Base?superstructure, ideology, false consciousness.
- **Representative:** Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson.
- **Critique:** May reduce artistic complexity to economics.

## 3.5 Psychoanalytic / Freudian & Lacanian

- **Core idea:** Texts reveal unconscious desires, anxieties, and symbolic structures.
- **Key tools:** Oedipal analysis, the mirror stage, the symbolic order.
- **Representative:** Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva.
- **Critique:** Overemphasis on pathology; cultural specificity can be limited.

## 3.6 Feminist & Gender Theory

- **Core idea:** Literature constructs and perpetuates gendered power dynamics.
- **Key concepts:** Patriarchal discourse, the male gaze, intersectionality.

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- **Representative:** Elaine Showalter, Judith