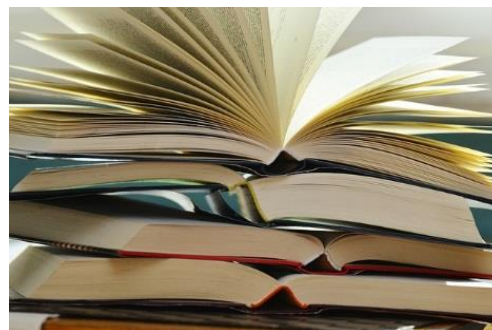


A Guide to Basic Literary Theory: What Every English Major Should Know

What distinguishes an English major from a casual reader? English majors and other advanced students of the field of English studies recognize and pay particular attention to the way that language affects meaning. Where a casual or practical reader reads the surface of a text to understand the basic content and to find the immediately obvious meaning communicated in any text, a student of English studies looks deeper. English majors identify and explore the multiple effects, influences, and implied meanings created by the particular way language is used.

If you have ever had a heated conversation with a friend or family member, you know that language does not always convey transparently exactly what we are thinking, and even the most innocently intended comment can be interpreted differently by audiences who notice different connotations in the choice of words. English majors study the way that meaning is created in that exchange between writers/speakers, readers/listeners, and the complexity of language itself. We use **literary theory** to help us uncover and make sense of those subtle, below-the-surface effects of language.

Literary theory does not mean making hypotheses or guesses about literature. In the field of English studies (and most academic disciplines), theory refers to the study of the **underlying assumptions we make** about the nature of language, authors, readers, texts, human subjectivity, narrative, aesthetics, power, culture, and other major elements of literary production and reception. The practical application of these theories emerges in **literary criticism**, where we make concrete arguments often supported by close readings of textual details about the way our underlying assumptions play out in a particular text or texts.



Literary theory includes schools of thought and a set of often abstract and philosophical writings that help us decide how we want to approach a text based on our definitions of literature and its function in the world:

- Is literature about culture, society, differences among different groups of people?
- Is it about the beauty of language, the imagination, authorship and originality, or the creation of word-based art? Is it about status, elitism, high culture, *belles lettres*, or just plain self-expression in its most democratic and egalitarian sense?
- Is it about the possibilities or failures of communication or representation through language?
- Is it about the human psyche and what it reveals or hides with words? Is it about identity and the representation of characters as a key to figuring out what it is to be human?
- Is it about history—either making it, reflecting it, or reshaping it?

Literary theorists write books and articles that give us useful terminology for explaining these concepts that are embedded deep within the literature we read. The following list identifies key theoretical questions, theories, and theorists who may help you explain and refine the underlying assumptions you

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already make when reading and analyzing literature. Use these broad definitions of literary theories to help guide your own deeper research into those theoretical questions that are most meaningful to you. Combining theories and drawing connections across theoretical schools and major concepts is a common way for today's critics to add their own contribution to the critical conversation.

Theoretical Question 1: Is literature fundamentally about culture, society, and differences among different groups of people?

Major Theoretical Concepts:

- Challenging assumptions about human differences, especially those relating to gender and sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality
- Overturning social hierarchies and redefining human differences as an effect of cultural practices and power dynamics, not intellectual, physical, or other innate limitations
- Exposing the ways that literature of the past has depended upon inequalities to produce literary genres and establish cultural and social power
- Promoting literature of resistance that gives voice to diverse cultural positions to better align literature with political justice and cultural truth



Examples of Theorists and Theoretical Movements/Schools

- **Feminist literary theory**, including Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (1979)
- **Gender theory and queer theory**, including bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)
- **Theories of African diasporic Négritude and African American studies**, including W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), Henry Louis Gates's "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes" (1985), Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985), Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1995)
- **Theories of mestizaje and multiethnic studies**, including Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Arnold Krupat's *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989), Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling's *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (1992)

- **Theories of intersectionality and critical race theory:** Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (1995), and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2001)
- **Postcolonial theory**, including Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988), Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), and Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994)

Theoretical Question 2: Is literature about the beauty of language, the imagination, authorship and originality, or the creation of word-based art? Is it about status, elitism, high culture, *belles lettres*, or just plain self-expression in its most democratic and egalitarian sense?

Major Theoretical Concepts:

- Defining structures, genres, formal characteristics, moral and didactic purposes, and various functions and effects of literary texts.
- Distinguishing the “literary” from everything else due to its “nobility” or its “defamiliarization” of normal language (esp. important to theorists in the school of Russian Formalism)
- Exploring the nature of inspiration, genius, originality, and authorship
- Considering the relationship between authors, language, society, and the texts they produce, especially through concepts like the author-function and intertextuality
- Focusing on the ways that formal elements of literature create a coherent meaning that is deeper and more profound than everyday language could express (esp. important in New Criticism).
- Rethinking and questioning divisions between elite or “high-brow” literature and popular culture texts, such as television, film and popular culture



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Examples of Theorists and Theoretical Movements/Schools

- **Classical literary theory**, such as Aristotle’s *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE)
- Longinus’s *On the Sublime* (1st century CE)
- **Renaissance theories** like Sir Philip Sidney’s “An Apology for Poetry” (1595)
- **Neoclassical literary theory**, including John Dryden’s *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668) or Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1711)
- **Romanticism**, including William Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads with Other Poems* (1800) and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Defense of Poetry” (1821)
- Matthew Arnold’s *Essays in Criticism* (1865)

- **New Criticism**, including Cleanth Brook's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941)
- **Practical Criticism**, including F. R. Leavis's *For Continuity* (1933) and I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924)
- **Formalism or Russian Formalism**, including Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (1925) and Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)
- **Narratology**, including Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1967-70 in French, 1980 in English) and Tzvetan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* (1971)
- **Structuralism**, including Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* (1958, translated 1963) and *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964, translated in 1969), as well as Roland Barthes's "An Introduction to a Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1975)
- **Post-structuralism**, including Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) and *From Work to Text* (1971), Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969), and Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980)
- **Cultural Studies**, including Stuart Hall's *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973) and "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" (1980)

Theoretical Question 3: Is literature about the possibilities or failures of communication or representation through language?

Major Theoretical Concepts:

- Debating the differences and similarities between words and the things themselves, the "real" world and the world of the text
- Understanding the relationship between word and meaning, symbol systems, the signifier of meaning and the thing signified, often through the field of linguistics
- Understanding the workings of various signs, texts, or other representations of meaning through culture or language (esp. in theories of semiotics)
- Questioning the arbitrary nature of meaning within language and exposing the ways in which meaning seeps out of and slips away from the words used to represent it as well as the ways in which all human knowledge is caught inside of the imperfect language used to express it (there is nothing outside the text), esp. in the theory of deconstruction.



Figure 2 By User:MatthiasKabel - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5319651>

Examples of Theorists and Theoretical Movements/Schools:

- **Classicism**, including concepts of imitation and mimesis in Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) and Plato's *Republic* (c. 380 BCE)

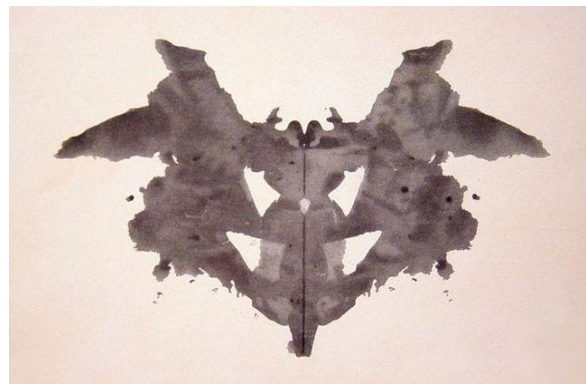
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- **Structuralism**, including Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916)
- **Semiotics**, including Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (1972)
- **Deconstruction**, including Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1978)
- **Reader-response Criticism**, including Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980)

Theoretical Question 4: Is literature about the human psyche and what it reveals or hides with words? Is literature about the nature of identity and the representation of characters as keys to figuring out what it means to be human?

Major Theoretical Concepts:

- Exploring the fundamental nature of identity, the mind, the body, and the self, especially as it relates to authors, readers, and invented or real characters.
- Analyzing the relationship between words and the unconscious fears, desires, and concerns of the people who attempt to express themselves in language
- Exploring the effects of constructing the subject as “normal” in exclusive and exclusionary ways



Examples of Theorists and Theoretical Movements/Schools:

- **Psychoanalytic criticism**, include Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1913)
- **Poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory**, including Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* (1977)
- **Feminist psychoanalytic theory**, including Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), Hélène Cixous's “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), and Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985)
- **Disability studies**, best exemplified by the essays in L. J. Davis's *The Disabilities Studies Reader* (2013)

Theoretical Question 5: Is literature about history—either making it, reflecting it, or reshaping it?

Major Theoretical Concepts:

- Understanding the individual as a subject who can act within larger social structures, but who is also subjected to the definitions and expectations of economic and political institutions
- Defining literature as one of many cultural institutions that interact with the political and economic power of the time and that narrate the relationship between individuals and the



institutions of power in the world

- Untangling the ways in which literature is both shaped by and shapes history, sometimes resisting mainstream values and sometimes reinforcing those values.

Examples of Theorists and Theoretical Movements/Schools:

- **Marxist theory**, including Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1971), Frederic Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1971), Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), and Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978)
- **New Historicism**, including Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-fashioning* (1980), Louis Montrose's "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture" (1983), and Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's *Practicing New Historicism* (2000)
- **Cultural Materialism**, including Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985), Andrew Milner's *Re-imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism* (2002)
- **Ideology theory**, including Louis Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (1971) and Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989)
- **Discourse theories**, including Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972)
- **Ecocriticism, Dark Ecology, and Posthumanism**, including Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells's *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* 1998, Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010), and Cary Wolfe *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010)



Figure 3 By Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires from Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina - Torre de Babel, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20231201>