

Humanism and Literary Theory

This discussion is based on Chapter One, "Theory Before Theory," in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

We began class by talking about what literature is, and how you know a piece of literature, as distinct from any other kind of writing. We then talked about what literature does, why one reads it, what one gets out of it; I made a list on the board of all the responses, and then began to talk about how "literature" moved from being something one read for pleasure to an academic field of study or type of knowledge.

Literary study began in Britain in 1840s, with the idea that the study of literature would "emancipate us from the notions and habits" of our own age, connecting us instead with what is "fixed and enduring"--the idea here is that literature holds timeless universal human truths (and hence can be read without regard to historical context of its production, and without regard to particular historical moment in which we read it and make meaning out of it).

The idea behind literary study was to secure middle-class values, to transmit them to all classes (working class as well as aristocracy) so that those values would indeed become universal.

The problem with studying lit at the university level initially was problem of defining HOW one studies lit. If the study of literature develops taste, educates sympathies, enlarges the mind, makes one a better human--how are those things measured? How can they be studied and assessed? At the end of the nineteenth century, in both England and America, as academics began to push for university courses in English and American literature, these questions arose. How could the study of literature be defined and carried out in a manner that was disciplined and objective enough to give it status as an academic pursuit (and not just "chatter about Shelley," as one critic put it--or as statements about what one likes or doesn't like in lit.)

This debate led, not only to the development of the first English departments, but to the development of the first types of literary theory, i.e., theories about how literature worked, what it did, and how it ought to be read and studied.'

There are two main tracks in literary theory. One begins with I.A. Richards' notion of "practical criticism," which we might call "close reading." This theory insisted that the best, and indeed the only, way to study literature was to study the text itself in close detail, and to disregard anything outside the

text itself, including the author's biography, the historical context in which the work appeared, how it related to other works both before, during, and after its appearance, and how critics and readers responded to the text. In short, this branch of criticism theorized the literary text as an isolated object, something to be studied in and of itself alone. This is the theory that says what literature students ought to do is read the words on the page, and nothing else.

The second track in literary theory looks at the text as a key to understanding questions and ideas beyond the text itself. (This tradition is traced through Phillip Sidney, Wordsworth, and Henry James, among others). Rather than centering on the text alone, this track asks "big picture" questions: How are literary texts structured? How are they different from non-literary texts (if indeed they are)? How do literary texts affect audiences/readers (i.e. what does literature DO to you)? Is there such a thing as a specifically "literary" language, and if so, what is it like? How does literature relate to other aspects of a culture, such as politics, or gender relations, or philosophy, or economics? Theorists in this track use the literary text as a kind of springboard to ask questions that are not solely concerned with "the words on the page."

Current literary theory comes from both tracks. We begin by acknowledging that "the words on the page" are the basis for any analysis of any piece of literature--the raw material from which any argument or ideas must necessarily come. But the analysis rarely stops with close reading; that close reading shows us something, not only about the construction of the text, but about the author, the reader, the social contexts of both, and about the methods of interpretation available to authors and readers.

Both tracks, up until about the late 1960s, shared certain fundamental assumptions about what literature was, how it worked, how we read it, and why reading literature was important. We can sum up these assumptions in ten major points.

1. Good literature is of timeless significance.
2. The literary text contains its own meaning within itself.
3. (related to point 2): the best way to study the text is to study the words on the page, without any predefined agenda for what one wants to find there.
4. The text will reveal constants, universal truths, about human nature, because human nature itself is constant and unchanging. People are pretty much the same everywhere, in all ages and in all cultures.

5. The text can speak to the inner truths of each of us because our individuality, our "self," is something unique to each of us, something essential to our inner core. This inner essential self can and does transcend all external social forces (i.e. no matter what happens to me, I will always be me).

6. The purpose of literature is the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values; on the other hand, literature should always be "disinterested," i.e. it should never have an overt agenda of trying to change someone (or it will become propaganda).

7. In a literary work, form and content are fused together, and are integral parts of each other.

8. A literary work is "sincere," meaning it is honest, true to experience and human nature, and thus can speak the truth about the human condition.

9. What is valuable in literature is that it shows us our true nature, and the true nature of society, without preaching (like point 6); it shows through drama, event, character, and conflict, rather than explaining, lecturing, or demonstrating.

10. What critics do is interpret the text (based largely on the words on the page) so that the reader can get more out of reading the text.

So far we're still on pretty familiar ground. What is going to be most striking, and most disturbing, about the kinds of literary theory you'll encounter this semester is how different most of them are from what you already know about how to read literature. The qualities of literature we've listed on the board--the timeless value, the secrets of human nature, the moral lessons literature teaches--all belong to a particular tradition in studying literature. Rather than just being "what one does" with literature, these ideas about the value of literature come from a particular perspective, which is generally called "liberal humanism" or just "humanism."

Liberal humanism started to lose its credibility in the late 1960s. What happened in the 1960s is pretty complicated, in terms of literary and social history. In a nutshell, literary critics responded to the social and political questions arising about race, gender, class, sexuality (etc.) by asking whether these timeless universal human truths found in lit. really were timeless and universal, or whether they weren't just as bound to race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture as everything else in the world. In other words, they started to ask questions like, is Shakespeare really "universal," or did he write as a white male in the 16th century? And if so, how did we come to read Shakespeare as "classic" and "timeless"?

Not everything prior to the 1960s fell under the heading of "humanism," however. In fact, many writers throughout the 20th century have questioned one or more of the basic assumptions of humanism, as have several schools of criticism and theory. Marxist criticism and psychoanalytic, for example, which pay attention to how social class and sexuality (respectively) function in producing literature, authors, readers, and particular kinds of interpretations, have challenged humanist principles consistently. What changed in the 1960s was that humanism became labeled as such, as a particular perspective or kind of theory of literature, rather than simply "the truth" about literature and how one approaches it.

The theory "boom" that occurred in the 1970s threw all of the humanist assumptions into question. The theories we'll be looking at this semester will strike you as alien and unfamiliar precisely because they throw out all the familiar ways we've learned to think about literature and about ourselves.

Just to start with: the theories we'll be reading have certain ideas in common. They include

1. The idea that things we have thought of as constant, including the notion of our own identity (gender identity, national identity, e.g.) are not stable and fixed, but rather are fluid, changing, unstable. Rather than being innate essences, these qualities of identity are "socially constructed." (A lot of the theories we'll be looking at are concerned with HOW such identities are constructed, and how they come to look and feel so stable and constant). Most of the theories we'll look at throw out the idea of there being anything absolute, especially any absolute truth, and instead focus on how everything is constructed and provisional.
2. Theorists also throw out the idea of objectivity, arguing that everything one thinks or does is in some degree the product of one's past experiences, one's beliefs, one's ideology. Where liberal humanists deny this, and insist they can look at a literary text with no preconceived notions of what they'll find, they are only masking their own ideological commitment. This idea relates back to the first idea, that truth is all a matter of perspective; this leads to the idea that thought and truth are all "relative," rather than absolute.
3. The theorists we'll read agree that language is the most important factor in shaping all our conceptions about life, ourselves, literary texts, and the world. Rather than language reflecting the "real world," language actually creates and structures our perceptions of "reality." Furthermore, rather than being speakers of language, these theorists hold that we are products of language.

4. Because all truths are relative, all supposedly "essential" constants are fluid, and language determines reality, these theorists conclude that there is no such thing as definitive meaning. There is only ambiguity, fluid meaning, multiple meaning, especially in a literary text.

5. Again, because of this idea of relativism, there is no such thing as a "total" theory, one which explains every aspect of some event. (Though of course this critique can circle back against each of the five points I've just named, which have been presented as if they were absolute, fixed, definite, and total).

Don't worry if this doesn't make sense to you yet, if your head is spinning after all this. Understanding these ideas is what this course is all about, and I don't expect you to know what's going on before the course has even started.

Don't worry too if you dislike all the ideas I've just gone over. Some people would point to the decline of the humanist perspective, and the rise of the modern theoretical perspective (with its insistence on relativism, ambiguity, multiplicity, etc.) as EXACTLY what's wrong with the world today. (If only we could return to the old-fashioned values, and believe in absolute truth, value, and permanence, they say, everything would be or at least a lot better than it is now). That's one of the questions we'll be looking at as we study these anti-humanist theorists this semester.

For further reading:

Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). All materials on this site are written by, and remain the property of, Dr. Mary Klages, Associate Professor of English, University of Colorado at Boulder. You are welcome to quote from this essay, or to link this page to your own site, with proper citation and attribution:

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