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LITERARY AND CRITICAL THEORIES

DEFINING CRITICISM,
THEORY AND LITERATURE

What is literature?

- Word meaning is “a writing formed with letters”
- A published work
- A work of imagination and creative power
- A work with artistic/aesthetic qualities
- A work which tells a story (on human values, emotions, ideas, actions)
- A work which is still read centuries after its creation

Literature

- is a subjective discipline, which means there can not be one certain or unquestionable truth of a work of literature. Literary works can be interpreted in a number of ways and can have more than one meaning. In this aspect, literature differs from the disciplines of science, which are based on experimental facts.

What is criticism?

- Criticism is a term derived from the Greek words “krino” meaning “to judge” and “krites” meaning “a judge or jury person”
- In general, criticism is the expression of disapproval of someone or something on the basis of perceived faults or mistakes.
- In literary terms, criticism is the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of a literary work.

Literary Criticism

- Literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret and evaluate works of literature. Anyone who attempts to evaluate texts in this fashion can be considered a literary critic; in other words “a judge of literature”.

Why is literary criticism important?

- Through literary criticism, readers produce different, often contradictory approaches and, in this way, advance/deepen arguments.
- Literary criticism contributes to readers' developing new perspectives and formulating their ideas on literary texts.
- Through literary criticism, we can knowingly explore the questions that help define our humanity, critique our culture, evaluate our actions, or simply increase our appreciation and enjoyment of both a literary work and life itself.

When analyzing a text, literary critics ask some basic questions about the philosophical, psychological, functional and descriptive nature of the text itself:

- Does a text have only one correct meaning?
- Is a text always didactic-that is, must a reader learn something from every text?
- Can a text be read only for enjoyment?
- Does a text affect every reader in the same way?
- How does history inform the activity of reading?

Continued...

- What role does the reader play in shaping meaning?
- Does the reader's gender matter at all?
- Who is the author? Is there an author?
- What is the relationship between a text and the context in which it is situated? (Context: The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood)
- How does history inform the activity of reading?

What is literary theory?

- Derived from the Greek word “theoria”, the word theory means a “view or perspective of the Greek stage.” Literary theory, then, offers to us a view of life, an understanding of why we interpret texts the way we do. Consider the various places in the theatre the audience may sit. Depending on our seats- whether we are close to the stage, far back, to the far left, to the far right, or in the middle row- our view and therefore our interpretation of the events taking place on the stage will change. Literary theory figuratively and literally asks where we are “sitting” when we are reading a text.

Literary Theory

- is the philosophical discussion of literary criticism's methods and goals
- A well-articulated literary theory assumes that an innocent reading of a text or a sheerly emotional or spontaneous reaction to a work cannot exist. Theory questions the assumptions, beliefs, and feelings of readers, asking why they respond to a text in a certain way.
- Whereas literary criticism involves our analysis of a text, literary theory is concerned with our understanding of the ideas, concepts and intellectual assumptions.

Literary Theory

- All readers have developed and continued to develop a worldview through which they construct meaning from a text and respond to a work of art. Upon such a conceptual framework rests literary theory. Using the worldviews consciously or unconsciously, readers respond to individual works of literature. For this reason, readers can establish different perspectives and approach from different angles to the same text. In other words “a reader brings to the text his or her past experience and present personality” .

Literary Theory

- There can be no one literary theory that encompasses all possible interpretations of a text. Additionally, there can be no one correct literary theory because each literary theory asks valid questions about a text and no one theory is capable of responding all questions to be asked about any text.

Variety of literary theories

- One theory may stress the text itself, believing that the text alone contains all the necessary information to arrive at an interpretation.
- Another theory may attempt to place a text in its historical, political, sociological, religious and economic settings.
- Another theory may direct its chief concern toward the text's audience.

Literary theory

- Each literary theory establishes its own theoretical basis and then proceeds to develop its own methodology whereby readers can apply the particular theory to an actual text. In effect, each literary theory or perspective is similar to taking a different seat in the theatre and thereby obtaining a different view of the stage. Different literary theorists may all study the same text, but being in different seats, the various literary theorists all respond differently to the text because of their unique perspectives.

Schools of criticism

- Although each reader's theory and methodology for arriving at a text's interpretation differs, sooner or later groups of readers and critics declare allegiance to a similar core of beliefs and band together, founding **schools of criticism**. For example, whereas critics who believe that social and historical concerns must be highlighted in a text are known as Marxist critics, reader-oriented critics concentrate on readers' personal reactions to the text and are called reader-response critics.

Major schools of literary criticism

- Russian Formalism and New Criticism
- Reader-Oriented Criticism
- Modernity and Postmodernism: Structuralism and Deconstruction
- Psychoanalytic Criticism
- Feminism
- Marxism
- New Historicism
- Mythological and Archetypal Approaches
- Ecocriticism

Applying theories on literary works

- In order to apply a theory on a literary work readers need to have a well-developed background about a theory apart from reading the text itself carefully. If readers have a pre-acquired knowledge about a literary theory they will directly build relations between the doctrines of the theory and the text itself even during the process of reading. Every character, incident, image or figure of speech can serve the reader to advance his reading from the related theory's perspective. As a result, this effort will enable them to gain a more intellectual insight to the text and the ability to evaluate it thoroughly.

Applying theories on literary works

- **“A horse, my Kingdom for a horse”** Richard III cries out after he falls from his horse down on the battlefield. Here, the image of “horse” can be interpreted from the perspectives of literary theories. A reader who read Sigmund Freud’s works and some other texts of psychoanalytical literary theory can claim that the horse represents “father” or “patriarchal power”. In this case, Richard might be seeing the horse as the representative of his control/power over his country. By keeping the horse under his rule Richard attempts to put himself in the place of the figure of “father”, namely the authority which he seeks after throughout the play.

Conclusion

- Because the various schools of criticism (and theories on which they are based) ask different questions about the same work of literature, these theoretical schools provide an abundance of options from which readers can choose to broaden their understanding not only of texts but also of their society, their culture and their own humanity. By embracing literary theory, we learn about literature, but importantly, we are also taught tolerance for other people's beliefs. By rejecting or ignoring theory, we are in danger of canonizing.

Conclusion

- Ourselves as literary saints who possess divine knowledge and who can, therefore, supply the only correct interpretation for a given text. When we oppose, disregard, or ignore literary theory, we are in danger of blindly accepting our often unquestioned prejudices and assumptions. By embracing literary theory and criticism, we can participate in that seemingly endless historical conversation about the nature of humanity and of humanity's concerns as expressed in literature. In the process, we can begin to question our concepts of ourselves, our society and our culture and how texts themselves help define and continually redefine these concepts