A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different lenses critics use to write and talk about art, literature, and even culture. These different lenses allow critics to consider works of art based on certain assumptions. Those assumptions come from the theories and decide what particular aspects of a work are important.

For example, if a critic is working with certain Marxist theories, s/he might focus on how the characters in a story are created by an economic situation. If a critic is working with post-colonial theories, s/he might consider the same story but look at how characters from colonial powers (Britain, France, and even America) construct characters from, say, Africa or the Caribbean. Below are some brief descriptions of specific theoretical approaches (From the Purdue Online Writing Lab).

All literary theories can be categorized by how they view the world outside the text. Formalist criticism looks at only the text and how well it is dressed- at the form of the text itself. Formalist criticism seeks a static, unchanging universal Truth within the text. Everything outside the text is irrelevant because it is not static—the Mona Lisa has an enigmatic smile whether one is male, female; young, old; Asian, European. Cultural Critics, on the other hand, always look at a work as a construct of the society that created it. Andy Warhol’s soup cans only mean something if you have grown up in a consumer culture. The song “YMCA” incorporates cultural assumptions that give it one particular meaning. A devoutly conservative Christian will have a different interpretation of the song than the producer who wrote it or the Santa Clarita teen who danced to it.

New Criticism: A form of Liberal Humanism, through symbols, themes, and characters, the text reveals the meaning of the overall piece through the resolution of some contradiction. This is a closed system in that the relationship between the text and meaning is autonomous. A canonical approach, this theory dismisses authorial intent and instead derives meaning from the text itself. Translated, what this means is that this is traditional literary criticism. It is infinitely teachable (i.e., there’s a right answer and critical reading skills illuminate that right answer). It fits into the broad sweep of a humanities curriculum. The role of the individual response is dismissed as an affective fallacy. Instead, there is an objective corollary, a theory put forth by T.S. Eliot that the tension at the core of the text inevitably surfaces through the actions of the characters. The role of the critic is to resolve the contradictions to find the right meaning.

Structuralism: Based upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the meaning of a text is in the familiar structures it employs. For example, a rose may symbolize love, or a stick figure may symbolize a person; however, literature has a very specific and important relationship to language. Signifiers (ideas) take the place of the signified. The identity, or meaning, is relational to the system in which it operates; therefore, the relationship of one signifier to another is what provides the context with which to extrapolate meaning. If you’ve ever seen an Italian Western or have been to Disneyland, you have seen structuralism in action.

Deconstruction: a philosophical assumption that all language is vague, so everything can be misread or making it impossible to interpret anything in a static/stable way. French philosopher Jacques Derrida once said, “Deconstruction cannot limit or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must…practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of nondiscursive forces” (328). A deconstruction tends to be a rather verbose document because it is aiming for the contradiction of showing the imprecision of language with precise language. Almost all deconstructions can be deconstructed themselves. Deconstruction can also be described as “a theory of reading which aims to undermine the logic of opposition within texts” (A Dictionary of Critical Theory, London: Blackwell, 1996). Put simply: nothing written can really mean what we think it means. An example is Hamlet where Hamlet asks “to be or not to be, that is the question.” Well, there is no question. “To be” is a transitive verb—it requires an object. So, one can’t just say “to be or not to be.” Therefore, the final meaning of that passage cannot be what we think it is.

Cultural Criticism
Post-Structuralism: Studied by former structuralists Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, post-structuralism connects meaning to culture. A reaction to structuralism, this mode of thinking is also a closed system; however, unlike structuralism where symbols, paradigms, and schema are connected to a universal meaning, post-structuralism deconstructs these signifiers as there are no universal truths, so signifiers/symbolic constructs cannot be relied upon to give meaning. In order to have actual meaning, they must become unstable or else they will simply work to leave hegemonies intact, thus leaving power structures in place.
Literary Theory
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Feminist Theory: The idea that patriarchal Western society subsumes the role of women with the use of language constructs and representations of society based on male viewpoints. Socioeconomic, experiential, and cultural differences do not lend themselves to a universal female ideology, and as such should not be the basis for understanding any piece of literature. In essence, new language is needed to express feminist viewpoints, thus rendering patriarchal hierarchies and ideologies impotent in literature. The problem is that since feminist literary theory began as an opposition to male critical theory, it tended to follow the patriarchal formula: In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf posited a hypothetical sister to Shakespeare, who, given the same conditions, would write works as good as Shakespeare’s. More recent feminist critics have posited a female voice that fundamentally differs from the male voice and which does not seek the validation of male theory.

Gender/Queer Theory: While feminist theory may look upon woman as Other, queer/gender theory opens discourse surrounding cultural binaries and binary oppositional language (father/mother, man/woman, masculine/feminine). Because cultural ideology at the base of gender and sexuality is ever-changing, ideas regarding them should not remain static either. In order to remain in flux, hegemonic ideologies and marginalization of gender/sexuality roles must also remain in flux.

Marxist: Marxist literary theories tend to focus on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinctions through the medium of literature. Marxist theorists use traditional techniques of literary analysis but subordinate aesthetic concerns to the final social and political meanings of literature. Marxist theorists often champion authors sympathetic to the working classes and authors whose work challenges economic inequalities found in capitalist societies. In keeping with the totalizing spirit of Marxism, literary theories arising from the Marxist paradigm have not only sought new ways of understanding the relationship between economic production and literature, but all cultural production as well. Marxist analyses of society and history have had a profound effect on literary theory and practical criticism, most notably in the development of “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism.” (From The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: University of Tennessee, Martin).

Postcolonial Theory – Hybrid: Made popular by Himi K. Bhabha, this theory suggests that a culture can never return to its pre-colonized ways. A culture does not stay, or become, stagnant because it has been colonized, an idea Western culture places upon the “other” (other cultures). Instead, cultures merge and become part of the colonized culture. Bhabha calls this mimicry the result of a colonized people adapting to survive under new culture rules. In order to survive, cultures mimic things such as clothes, music, education, and food, which in turn makes the “other” become more like the colonized. Although a mimic is almost the same, but not white, the “other” starts to become more like the dominant culture as it shakes the confidence in the colonizer’s ideas of their own universal truth, thus destabilizing colonialism itself.

Postcolonial Theory – Negritude: Coined by Aime Cesaire, this theory purports that black people from all over the world share a collective personality that is different from that of European personality. The movement calls for pride in one’s culture and independence from European “barbarians.” Leaders of this movement rejected the “savage” tag and exposed the savagery of the colonists.

Postcolonial Theory – Neocolonialism: Splitting the profits between local oligarchs and colonial powers updates the ravages of colonialism.

Postcolonial Theory – Orientalism: The theory put forward by Edward Said, which says that the West has come up with ideas about the orient in an attempt to describe and distance it from Western ideas. If Orient is lazy and cruel, the West is produced as hard working and kind. It shows how the West, in its construction of the Orient, allows for Western ideas to be seen as universal truths. By making these truths right and natural, it not only makes the Orient into the “other,” it also justifies the colonization of the people. The colonized may not have been physically colonized, but colonized by being “studied,” being the object of something someone else sought to understand.

Postcolonial Theory – Subaltern: This is the idea that a people without power, when speaking out for themselves or when speaking for groups, can actually be speaking for the system of ideologies put in place, which may or may not be their own beliefs. Marginalized “others” do not have access to imperial colonialist’s experience and culture; therefore, “others” operate within the confines of the oppressive group.

Psychoanalytic Theory: A broad spectrum of viewpoints inhabit this theory prompted by Freud’s work focusing on the Id, Ego, Superego, Desire, the Unconscious, and Defenses. With this theory, one can understand the text by psychoanalyzing motives, characters, symbols, actions, or any number of literary devices in order to discover meaning.

Reader Response: The text is completely subjective and authorial intent means nothing. Meaning is discovered through the reader’s reaction to what they have read, or the relationship between the reader and the text. Each reader may bring a different interpretation based on his/her ideology and experience.