

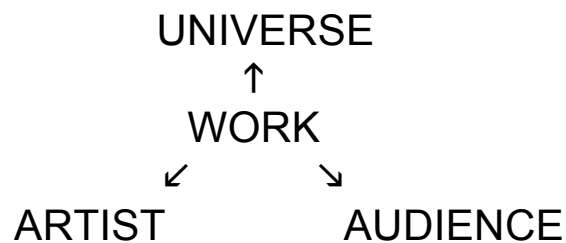
Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 1: Introduction

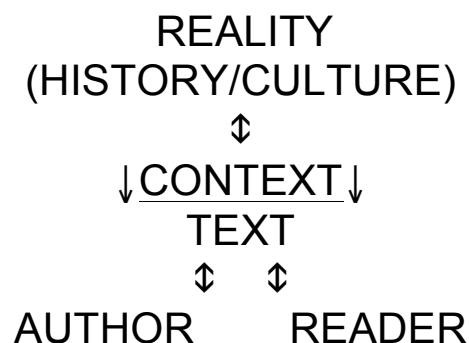
Lecture 2: The Historical Emergence of Literary Theory

- 1) Orientations of Critical Theories
- 2) The Western Tradition
- 3) Liberal Humanism vs. Critical Theory

1) Orientations of Critical Theories



(Abrams 1953, 6)



Survey of Orientations of Critical Theories

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • biographical approach (Positivism) • psychological/psychoanalytical approach • oeuvre studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hermeneutics • history of reception / aesthetics of reception • empirical reception studies
<p style="text-align: center;">author ↗</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↘ reader</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Text text-centred approaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new criticism / intrinsic approach (close reading) • rhetorics, stylistics, formalist/structuralist approaches • poststructuralism / deconstruction <p style="text-align: center;">Textuality</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↗</p> <p style="text-align: center;">historical reality</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↘</p> <p style="text-align: center;">other texts</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'background' studies (Positivism) • sociological approaches • Marxist approaches/ Cultural Materialism • New Historicism/historical discourse analysis • feminist approaches • postcolonial theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'sources and influence studies' • history of topics and themes • genre studies • intertextuality

2) The Western Tradition

Overall development:

objectivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →
*subjectivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →
reflexivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →

ontology → constructivism
essentialism → difference

Positivism/Marxism

*Hermeneutics

Formalism into Functionalism

Foundations

The Linguistic Turn

The Cultural Turn

1) Antiquity (c. 500 B.C. – 500 A.D.):

Mimetic and pragmatic criteria begin to dominate the production and reception of art and literature

⇒ the traditional Western attitude.

Mimetic Theories

Plato (427-347 B.C.): eternal and unchanging Ideas
(world of Essence)
reflected in the world of sense
(world of appearance)
reflected in shadows, images,
mirrors, works of art

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.): art imitates the nature of things/
human actions

Pragmatic Theories

Horace (65-8 B.C.): *prodesse et delectare*

[2) The Middle Ages (c. 500 A.D. – 1500 A.D.):

break in continuity because of cultural difference
perceived as 'poverty' in the Renaissance period]

3) Modernity (ca. 1500 A.D. – ????)

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586): to teach and to delight

Alexander Pope (1688-1744):

Poetry is "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd"
(*"Essay on Criticism"* 1709/13)

Expressive and Reflexive Theories

William Wordsworth (1770-1850):

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings:
it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity"
(*"Preface"* to the *Lyrical Ballads* 1800)

- ▶ ongoing negotiation of
traditional "objective", i.e. mimetic and pragmatic
dimensions of cultural meaning
(cf. Neoclassicism, Realism)
on the one hand and
modern "subjective", i.e. expressive and reflexive
dimensions of cultural meaning
on the other hand
(cf. Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism)

Traditional Criteria for Art and Literature

↓(based on the ideal of objective truth)↓

mimetic theories----->
-- ->pragmatic theories----->
----->expressive theories----->
-- ->reflexive theories----->

↑**Modern Criteria for Art and Literature**↑

(based on the emerging interface of
subjectivity and mediality)

Modernization (subj.) >

Compensation (obj.) >

Modernization (refl.) >

Hermeneutics

Positivism/Marxism

Formalism

Structuralism

[...]

-----1500-----1750-----1800-----1900-----2000----->

3) Liberal Humanism vs. Critical Theory

Traditional Ideas about Art and Literature:

(the ideology of liberal humanism, cf. Barry 1995, 16-21)

- Literature is of timeless significance.
- The literary text contains its own meaning within itself, it can (and must) be studied in isolation from contexts of any kind.
- Human nature is essentially unchanging.
- Individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique 'essence'. The subject is antecedent to and thus transcends the forces of society, experience, and language.
- The purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values. Criteria of excellence: organic fusion of form and content, 'sincerity', showing/'enactment' rather than explanation.

Recurrent Ideas in Critical Theory:

(cf. Barry 1995, 34-36)

- What we usually regard as the basic 'givens' of our existence (including our gender identity, our individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself) are actually fluid and unstable (i.e. 'socially constructed' and thus contingent) categories rather than fixed and reliable essences (> anti-essentialism, relativism, linguistic or cultural constructivism).
 - In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed or definite meanings.
 - 'Human nature' (and 'greatness' predicated on this idea) is not universal, but in practice Eurocentric and androcentric.
- ▶ Politics is pervasive,
Language is constitutive,
Truth is provisional,
Meaning is contingent,
Human nature is a myth.

Bibliography Lecture 2:

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(esp. ch. 1 "Orientation of Critical Theories").
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(esp. ch. 1 "Theory before 'Theory' – Liberal Humanism").
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(esp. ch. 1 "The Rise of Literary Theory").
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