

CORE TOPICS ADDRESSED BY LITERARY THEORISTS

The following are the main issues which literary theorists have addressed over the years:

1. The Audience / Reader / Critic (the 'Pragmatic' Approach): the major question addressed under this rubric is, what is the nature of the relationship which exists between a work and its audience (reader, viewer, spectator, critic)? There exist at least two ways of thinking about this question:
 - The 'Pragmatic' Approach: Do works affect or have a formative impact upon the audience? If so, should criticism concern itself primarily with what the work does to its audience? Accordingly, is criticism synonymous with a 'passive consumption' of what the work offers? Can the audience resist the impact which works have on them?
 - Reader-Response Theory: Can criticism be objective or neutral and, thus, a kind of 'science' capable of knowing the true meaning (the 'facts') of a work? Or is criticism necessarily subjective and thus at best merely an 'interpretation' that expresses the reader's subjective inclinations, biases, etc., rather than what is objectively present in the work? Does the audience, thus, necessarily affect or shape what they find in the work? Is criticism thus more akin to a 'productive activation' of the work?

2. The Author (the 'Expressive' Approach): The major question addressed under this rubric is: what is the nature of the relationship which links a work to its creator or producer? The 'Expressive' Approach: Is the work a vehicle for self-expression? If so, should criticism concern itself primarily with the source, cause or origin of the work? If so, what exactly should the critic seek to grasp in this regard?
 - the author's intention (his/her ideas, meaning, what s/he set out to say, the point s/he is trying to make, in short, the 'content' of the work)?
 - the author's emotions (the feelings, passions, etc. which imbue the work and express its 'tone,' i.e. the author's attitude to his subject matter)?
 - the author's identity (what evidence may be found in the work of his/her self, psychology, personality, character, the facts of his/her life, biography, etc.)?
 - the author's originality (what is unique, special, peculiar about his/her 'style,' what exactly differentiates the 'form' of his/her work from that of his/her predecessors)?

What are the criteria for deciding that the critic has correctly determined the author's intention, emotions, identity, originality?

3. Literary Form (the 'Objective' Approach): The 'Objective' Approach: Must criticism pay attention to the relationship which the work shares with its author (the 'expressive' approach), its social and historical context ('literary history'), its reader (the 'pragmatic' approach), and/or the world which it seeks to represent (the 'mimetic' approach)? Or does such foci distract the critic, directing his/her attention away from what it ought to be primarily focused on: analysing the precise form or structure of the work itself, the way it is put together?
 - Kind: Aristotle argues influentially that there are three basic 'kinds' of literature: drama, epic poetry (the ancestor of modern prose fiction), and lyric poetry. What are the formal criteria by which these kinds may be differentiated from each other? In other words, for example, what are the

formal features which distinguish an epic from a lyrical poem? Or a novel from a play?

- Genre: the three basic kinds may in turn be sub-divided into several 'genres' (e.g. tragic as opposed to comic plays, sonnets versus odes), and so on. What are the formal criteria by which the various genres may be differentiated from each other? In other words, for example, what are the formal features which distinguish a tragedy from a comedy? Or an epistolary novel from a 'bildungsroman'?

4. Literary History / Intertextuality / Canonicity: The basic question addressed under this rubric is: should the literary work be studied in isolation from A) other literary works and B) non-literary things associated with literature (e.g. authors [and their social and historical contexts] and, less obviously, readers [and their social and historical contexts])? If not, what is the precise nature of the relationship which exists between a literary work and its literary and non-literary others?

- Literary Historians argue that the literary work is linked historically to other works which precede it, those which emerge simultaneously with it, as well as those which postdate it. From this point of view, every body of literature (e.g. English or African or Caribbean literature) has a history which consists in a chronological succession of authors, their works, readers, literary conventions, genres, techniques and so on. (This is a diachronic conception of literature.) The dominant way of conceptualising literary history is author-oriented, that is, a given body of literature is most often conceived as a chronological succession of authors and their works. Related to this is the fact that each work is produced by an author who is in turn necessarily the product of a specific socio-historical context and from which the study of the work accordingly cannot be divorced (see Historicism). Literature is socio-historically informed in another, less obvious sense, as Hans-Robert Jauss argues: each work is necessarily read by readers who are also each the product of a specific time and place. Tradition (from the Latin word *traditio*, meaning 'to hand down' or 'to hand over') is sometimes used as a synonym for literary history. The term refers to those beliefs, customs and / or cultural practices (e.g. literature) handed down from one generation to the next (often orally) and which are responsible for the sense of a common history and culture which bind successive generations together. The following questions accordingly arise in this regard: what is the precise nature of the relationship that links authors (and their works) to their precursors and successors? Is this relationship merely historical in nature (i.e. one of chronological succession, e.g. Milton precedes Wordsworth who precedes Brathwaite)? Is this relationship one of influence (does Milton necessarily influence Wordsworth or Eliot Brathwaite because one precedes the other)? If so, do successors merely absorb the influences of their predecessors or can these pressures be altered or resisted in some way? Is it possible to conceptualise these relationships in other ways?
- Intertextuality (a neologism coined more recently by Julia Kristeva but a concept arguably pioneered by T. S. Eliot as early as 1917) offers an alternative way of conceptualising the connectedness of all literature. Predicated on a synchronic, rather than diachronic, and a text-oriented, rather than author-oriented, conception of literature, the term refers to the

relationship which works share with each other, irrespective of their time and place of production, and from which they derive their significance. Works form in this way a simultaneous (or synchronic) whole structured around intertextual relationships.

- Canonicity refers to the process by which some works are deemed of higher quality and, thus, worthy of study and preservation and accordingly elevated over others. The following questions accordingly arise: precisely how are canons formed? In other words, why exactly are some works granted classic status? Is this to do with what a work represents (the content)? With how it represent what it represents (their form)? With who wrote the work in question? Are there, in this regard, more sinister political forces at work in the formation of canons (e.g. do factors such as class, gender and / or race determine which authors are canonised)?

5. Representation (the 'Mimetic' Approach): the basic question addressed under this rubric is: what is the nature of the relationship which exists between a work and those aspects of reality which it seeks to describe, depict, portray or, in short, re-present? Can works objectively or accurately represent reality as it really is? Do works, as such, merely reflect, mirror, or correspond to reality? Or do works, rather, offer a necessarily subjective interpretation of reality and, thus, 'construct' a certain image of the world which is then often mistakenly assumed to be an accurate depiction of things as they really are? From this perspective, is 'reality,' or our sense of what reality consists, accordingly an effect or product of the work's discursive 'construction' of the real, rather than something which precedes the work and to which the work merely holds up a mirror?

- Realism v. Naturalism: the term 'realism,' as used by nineteenth century theorists such as Flaubert or the Goncourt brothers, refers broadly to the capacity of works in general, and prose fiction in particular, to accurately represent or hold a mirror up to reality. However, the term 'realism' also refers more narrowly to the view (developed by William James and others) that, to some degree at least, any attempt to depict the world must imply certain subjective elements derived from the particular vantage-point and, by extension, the psychology of the author in question. From this 'perspectivist' point of view, a work necessarily offers a particular interpretation of reality rather than the objective truth per se. This latter definition of realism is, arguably, a soft, quasi-Romantic use of the term. The term 'naturalism,' by contrast, refers to a harder, positivist theory of representation (developed in particular by Emile Zola) that emphasises that novels especially can, in a manner analogous to the application of the scientific method in the natural and social sciences, offer an objective, scientific and detailed account of things as as they actually are that has little or no truck with the subjective inclinations, biases and what not of the author.
- Content v. Form: what is the link between 'content' and 'form,' i.e. between what is represented and how it is represented? How one answers this question depends on the particular model of language which one prefers. On the one hand, if language is primarily expressive (that is, if it functions mainly to give vent to what is internal or peculiar to the speaker or writer in question), then the precise form of the work assumes great significance as a vehicle for expressing the individual point of view of the author.

Quasi-Romantic realists accordingly place great emphasis on the role played by various aspects of narrative technique (such as narrative point of view, and so on) in the discursive construction of reality. On the other hand, if language is primarily referential in nature (that is, if it functions mainly in a mimetic manner to hold a mirror up to the things of this world), then the form of the work in question may very well function as a basically transparent lens through which the world can be viewed in an unproblematic manner. For naturalists, accordingly, the various aspects of narrative technique play a less decisive role in the depiction of reality.