# Literary Theory: An Introduction Study Guide

## Literary Theory: An Introduction by Terry Eagleton

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# Plot Summary

Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction is a critical overview of the history of literary theory starting just before the emergence of the Romantic movement in eighteenth-century England and ending with the post-Structuralists in 1970s and 1980s. Through this historical approach, Eagleton explores the questions "What is literature?" and "What is literary theory?" After undermining the answers various schools of thought give to this answer, he concludes that literature is simply a social construct and literary theory, therefore, is an artificial discipline.

Eagleton begins the book by raising the difficulty of defining literature and, therefore, of defining literary theory. After supplying a few provisional solutions that all fail, he concludes that literature is an unstable category which varies greatly according to social, political, and cultural circumstances. As a result of its close connection with social and political factors, literature is intimately connected with the persistence, or abolition, of a society's power structures.

To illustrate this fact, Eagleton begins the body of the work by examining the history of literature. Literature is consistently shown to be a construct intended to conform the middle-class with upper-class values, which is even explicitly the goal of Matthew Arnold. A few schools of thought rise up to combat this, but ultimately undermine their own aims by lack of political action and implicit submission to the ruling class. Focus then shifts to Germany, where the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger greatly influence literary theory. The invention of structuralist linguistics by Saussure leads to an entirely new paradigm of literary analysis in the early twentieth century known as structuralism, which focuses primarily on the form rather than the content of literary works.

However, structuralism is ultimately flawed, and elements of it are incorporated into the linguistic and philosophical system known as post-structuralism, which is largely indebted to the work of Jacques Derrida. Post-Structuralism is dedicated to the exposing the contradictions in so-called "metaphysical" systems—systems which claim to be based on some fundamental, first principle. These systems range from male-dominated power structures to religion. The post-structuralist emphasis on language also involves them heavily in the analysis and "deconstruction" of literature to expose its hidden biases.

The book is concluded by returning to the original question of defining literary theory and determining that, ultimately, literary theory is an arbitrary, artificial science, since literature is not an identifiable object, but a social object determined by social forces. In its place should be substituted a general study of language, rhetoric. Furthermore, the political nature of language should be emphasized and the purpose of rhetoric should be the undermining of the existing political order and the creation a new socialist order in its place.

# Preface

## Preface Summary and Analysis

A good estimation for the beginning of literary theory is the 1917 essay "Art as Device" by a Russian theorist named Viktor Shklovsky. Since that time, a massive amount has been written on literary theory. However, despite the explosion in popularity among scholars, literary theory still remains virtually unknown to most readers and students. The purpose of this book is to present literary theory in a way that can be easily understood by someone without a background in the field without oversimplifying it. Since there is no way to present literary theory in an entirely objective manner, the text argues for a specific form of literary theory throughout.

Some people complain that literary theory is unnecessary and interferes with the experience of reading. Those who make this complaint are ready to subscribing to a certain theory of literature, even if they are not aware of it. In order to read at all, or even to just identify a literary work, it is necessary to have certain theoretical premises, even if they are totally unconscious. The purpose of the book is to make those premises explicit.

# Introduction: What is Literature?

## Introduction: What is Literature? Summary and Analysis

The notion of literary theory implies the existence of literature. Therefore, before literary theory can be studied, "literature" must first be defined. It is at first tempting to associate literature with fiction. However, this definition is obviously flawed as it would exclude many works which are considered fiction, such as the essays of Francis Bacon or John Donne's religious sermons. Even some philosophical works like those of Mill or Hobbes could be included in literature. The sharp distinction between fact and fiction is not even a universal one, as many cultures in the past did not seem to accept it. Further, there are some works which may have been considered fact by their authors, but are considered fiction by others, such as the Book of Genesis. Finally, there are fictional pieces which most would not consider literature, such as comic books. It is obvious, then, that this distinction is not enough to define literature.

The Russian Formalists, a school of literary theorists, defined literature exclusively in terms of language. They believed that all literary criticism began and ended with a study of the language employed itself, and the content of the piece of literature was secondary or ignored altogether. Thus, for example, the book Animal Farm was not an allegory about Communism, but Communism was just an occasion to write an allegory. In other words, the most important fact about the book was that it was an allegory, not what the allegory was about.

Literature was, for the Formalists, an "arbitrary assemblage" of literary and linguistic devices—imagery, sentence structure, metaphors, and so on. What all of these devices had in common and what made them particularly "literary" was the way in which they made language strange or unfamiliar and, indirectly, made the world seem strange and unfamiliar. In other words, literature was literature precisely because it used language in a way that drew attention to itself by deviating from so-called ordinary speech. The difficulty with this definition is that to identify something as a deviation implies that there is a norm. However, ordinary language is in many ways a myth, as people's linguistic customs and patterns vary widely. What might seem to be a deviation in one context, therefore, might be the norm in another. The Russian Formalists were aware of this and understood that whether or not something was literature depended upon a specific linguistic context. As a result, the Formalists restricted their claims from attempting to define literature to simply trying to define a quality they called "literariness"—which simply meant that it differs from other types of discourses. However, this also entailed that they had effectively given up defining literature.

Another way to define literature is as a "non-pragmatic treatment of language". That is, literature might be thought of as a way of writing for no immediate, concrete purpose. A textbook or a note left for someone both serve immediate purposes—to teach or to pass on some piece of information. A literary piece, however, is not so practical or limited in

scope. Furthermore, this definition also implies that the direct object of a piece of literature is not as important as the general idea which it suggests. When a poet writes about how lovely a woman is, for example, he is probably talking about beauty or femininity in general and not just about the specific woman he has in mind. There are difficulties in this definition of literature, too, however. Many pieces of literature are trying to make a specific point about a political or social phenomenon and any text can be read for a variety of purposes, and this definition would imply that whether something is literature depends largely upon the attitude of the reader.

The instability of the term "literature" stems from the fact that all readers share in their society's ideology—the beliefs and myths that underlie the systems of power that are in place. This ideology is neither fully objective—it is often unconscious and covert—nor it is also not entirely subjective, as it is something that permeates through all members of a society, especially through language. It is the ideology of the society that, for the most part, determines what is considered literature and what is not.

# Chapter 1, Rise of the English

## Chapter 1, Rise of the English Summary and Analysis

The concept of literature in eighteenth-century England was not identified as it is today with "imaginative" writing. Rather, literature was the collection of writing in the society that was considered valuable and fulfilled the standards of "polite letters". Thus, the concept of literature was determined wholly by the values of one social group. However, literature served a more important function than simply embodying the tastes of that social class; it also helped spread them throughout the rest of society. The political situation of England in that time was precarious, as revolutions were occurring in many parts of the world and the country had just come out of a bloody civil war in the seventeenth century. In order to maintain political stability, the upper-class needed to unite the country by inculcating their values in the middle and lower classes.

The dominant ideology of the eighteenth century is utilitarianism, a philosophy in which productivity and usefulness are valued over everything else. As a result, art for its own sake becomes highly devalued and literature becomes a way of turning society into an "ideal" industrialized, capitalist nation. The Romantic movement in literature follows directly from these conditions. The Romantics are probably the source for the identification of literature with imaginativeness and creativity. Prior to their appearance, fiction and non-fiction alike were considered to be literature (if, of course, they met the standards of the ruling class).

The fact that literature becomes so closely entwined with fiction in the Romantic period suggests a growing attitude, at least among writers in the Romantic tradition, that there is something more attractive about fantasy than reality. This is surely a response to the suffocating and rigid way of life that developed in England as a result of utilitarian philosophy. Utilitarians dismissed imagination as useless and valued only "hard facts". It is not surprising, then, that the Romantics react by enthroning imagination and dismissing hard facts. Literature becomes a way of liberating the reader and the writer from the shackles of industrialized life in eighteenth century England.

The study of aesthetics grew immensely in this period as well, largely as a result of the changing position of the artist who no longer was elevated socially by being in the service of an aristocrat or ruler. The renewed interest in aesthetics leads to the doctrine of the symbol, which becomes dominant in literary traditions. Symbolism was a way of reacting against the dominant philosophies of the day in a radical way. While the official philosophies of England valued deliberation, reason, and analysis, the symbol, at least in the nineteenth century, is a kind of transcended spiritual truth which can be perceived but not analyzed; it represents an opposition to the philosophies of the period.

As England progressed into the nineteenth century, the study and celebration of literature increased significantly. It is reasonable to think that one large factor in this elevation is the simultaneous decline of religion. Religion is a particularly useful way of

uniting and controlling a society as, by its nature, it can simultaneously encompass both the elite and the "common man" and unite them together, however awkwardly, into a kind of single unity. While religion had served the purpose of cementing society together in previous centuries, this hold was weakening in the nineteenth century and the Victorian elite looked to literature as a way of maintaining their power. This power-play is even explicit in the words of Matthew Arnold who, noting that the aristocracy is losing its power, looks to the use of literature as a way of inculcating pro-aristocratic ideology in the middle-class. Literature served these purposes well. First, as literature generally treats of abstract, universal ideas, it distracts the working-class from their everyday struggles. It also instilled in the working-class a sense of pride both in their language and in their nation as a whole.

Following the war, a new group of English students emerged and transformed the field in the course of just a decade. Their action was centered around a newsletter they circulated called "Scrutiny". While the status of English as a subject of study was raised slightly during the War, many prejudices about its usefulness remained. However, this new group of students painstakingly changed this perception, and by the 1930s the status of English was arguably elevated higher than any other discipline. This transformation was brought about by identifying literature as the one means to curing the spiritual crisis of post-war Europe.

However, despite these lofty goals, the "Scrutiny" members were notable for their lack of real political action. While some members briefly toyed with some radical political ideas such as communism, they were, for the most part, afraid of advocating any real political change. The members seemed to have thought that simply educating students in English would somehow spontaneously result in social changes and that it was unnecessary, therefore, to explicitly espouse any political views. Further, even if education were to have this effect, only a small portion of Englishmen actually had access to this kind of education.

The "Scrutiny" movement also failed to achieve results in part because of its profound elitism. If reading literature was the only way to redeem oneself from the soul-destroying effects of capitalism, then the vast majority of people who do not read literature are necessarily cast in a very poor light. Further, many members of the "Scrutiny" clique hardly exhibited the elevated, pure behavior they touted.

At the same time as the "Scrutiny" group was rising and falling in prominence, other literary schools began to develop. T.S. Eliot, an American who moved to England, initiated a radical new understanding of English literary history. The entirety of English political history was re-interpreted through the eyes of literature. Eliot believed that English literature had become incredibly degenerate and that this degeneration happened through the development of several ideologies which led authors away from the so-called Tradition. Tradition was a kind of mystical historical entity which seemed to either "flow" through certain works or did not and, naturally, it did flow through the works of T.S. Eliot. Tradition was also a way of restoring society to a mythical golden age.

I.A. Richards, one of the original members of the "Scrutiny" clique, later branched off and founded his own independent school of literary theory. Richards claimed that social role of literature, particularly poetry, was to pacify the masses who could no longer cling the traditional mythologies of religion which had been discredited by modern science. While poetry could not give real solutions to these problems—since science and history were correct in debunking those myths—it could create a kind of satisfying re-arrangement of emotions that would at the very least cover up the problem. Without this "therapy", the values of society would fall apart.

The ideology of Richards, as well as that of Eliot, played a large role in the formation of the literary school referred to as American New Criticism. This school developed during the 1930s and flourished until the 1950s. The school idealized the American South as a kind of last bastion for tradition and purity, even as those qualities that were characteristic of the South were being destroyed by invading Northern businessmen. The North was characterized as callous and rationalistic and, as a result, the response to the North's increasing dominance was the irrational, or at least non-rational, influence of poetry.

For American New Criticism, the poem was an embodiment of reality in a way no other art could be. While the poem in itself represented a kind of organic unity in which all of the parts worked spontaneously together—once again, a metaphor for the idealized organic utopia—it was always insisted that the poem still, somehow, contained reality within it, even though how exactly this happened was never explained. The poem also, therefore, became a kind of object in itself, separate both from the conditions of the reader and the author. In this way, American New Criticism drew very close to Formalism and even went so far as to say that the intentions of the author are totally irrelevant to the study of a piece of literature.

While the appreciation of poetry was in many ways irrational for American New Criticism, unlike the Romantics, the proponents of this school were not at all opposed to literary criticism and analysis. In fact, given their insistence on the objective nature of the poem, an extreme degree of equally objective analysis and dissection was possible.

New Criticism arose at a time when American literary criticism was facing difficulty in being accepted as a serious discipline at universities. Like their English counterparts, many universities simply felt that it was too ethereal to really form the basis of study and instead focused on the hard sciences. However, in time, literary theory did become accepted by academia, largely due to the growing acceptance of New Criticism. This acceptance was facilitated by two factors. First, with its emphasis on poetry, New American Criticism was a very practical subject to teach in universities, which were rapidly growing in size. Instead of having to distribute and teach large textbooks or novels, a teacher could pass out a few small poems, saving both time and money. Second, by emphasizing the contemplative experience of poetry-reading, New American Criticism helped lull many anxious students and scholars during the tense period of the Cold War and also led them to passively accept many changes at home, such as the civil rights movement or McCarthyism.

William Empson is sometimes included as one of the fundamental influences of New Criticism, but he was actually one of their most vocal opponents. Empson was a proponent of traditional rationalism and opposed the passionate excesses of many of the members of New Criticism. While New Criticism mystified the poem and turned it into a kind of transcendent, persisting object, Empson claimed that poetry was simply a variation on ordinary language and could be successfully re-phrased without a loss of substance. Further, Empson insisted on the importance of the author's intention as a way of understanding the poem, even giving it primacy over the words themselves. Poems, just like ordinary language, are also very imperfect according to Empson, and continue many ambiguities which simply cannot be overcome. Empson also attempted to minimize the gap between in the intellectual reader and the common reader.

# Chapter 2, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory

## Chapter 2, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory Summary and Analysis

Following World War I, hard science and philosophy were in a very poor state. Science had become nothing more than the organization and classifying of facts and philosophy, torn between a radical empiricism which focused exclusively on the objective and factual, and subjectivism, which focused entirely on fleeting personal experience. In response, a German philosopher named Husserl created a new school of philosophy known as phenomenology. The goal of phenomenology was to regenerate European society by providing a new, stable basis on which all other philosophies and sciences could securely stand.

Phenomenology begins by rejecting the assumption that the objects one perceives are real. It does not necessarily deny this assumption, but it does not assume that it is true. Rather, phenomenology begins with the individual perception of an object. While an object may or may not be real, that one is experiencing something certainly is real. The work of phenomenology, then, is to examine these experiences—or phenomena—and determine what is essential, or unchanging, about them. In this way, phenomenology broke with both dominant tendencies in European philosophy, empiricism and subjectivism: It neither focused exclusively on individual facts, as did empiricism, nor on individual experiences, as did subjectivism. Rather, it alleged to uncover the true, universal reality of things through the analysis of human experience.

While Husserl's philosophy had some influence on the Formalists movement, its main influence can be seen in a literary school of the same name—phenomenological criticism. This school saw works of literature as images of the author's consciousness and the work of the reader was to engage himself in the "world" that the text created so as to experience what the author experienced when writing it. Despite its emphasis upon the author's mind being present in the work, however, any external information about the author, his historical setting, or social situation was considered totally irrelevant to literary analysis. Further, this mode of literary analysis is necessarily unevaluative—rather than passing some kind of judgment on the author's work, the only aim is to understand his experience.

This type of literary criticism—and indeed phenomenology as a philosophy—rests upon a flawed understanding of language. For phenomenological critics, language is simply a tool by which the author transmits his consciousness. The "meaning" of the language is something far deeper and less superficial than the words it is expressed in. However, meaning is not only something which is transmitted by language, it is actually produced by it. Language, moreover, is a deeply social construct. As a result, to his core, man is a

thoroughly social creature. Phenomenology, then, depends upon the impossible notion of a private language which is then flawlessly translated into a public language.

In response to these flaws, one of Husserl's students, Martin Heidegger, developed an entirely different philosophical system. Rather than beginning with experience, Heidegger chose the fact of existence as a starting point for all philosophical investigation. While man was at the center of the universe in phenomenology, in Heidegger's philosophy, man is seen as entirely part of and even subject to the world. The world is not a projection of man's mind as it was for Husserl; rather, man is in many ways a product of the world in which he lives, and he is especially the product of his time and history. Language, too, is seen as a significant cause of how a man is. Unlike phenomenology, Heidegger's philosophy places a great importance on language. Though language is the product of humans, it in some ways pre-exists any individual: their language is a "given" that they must passively accept. Language, moreover, is man's only way to interact with or understand the world; as a result, language, like time, is a major component in what a man is.

Heidegger's philosophy, however, is ultimately romantic. By placing the world in such a dominant position over man, it becomes natural to almost deify existence and totally give oneself over to it, as Heidegger's philosophy indeed suggests. To truly find truth, one must look to the earth and the trees and passively accept what they "say". This philosophy, in other words, like so many others, seeks to find a mythical "organic community".

Heidegger's philosophy shares some similarities with formalism. Heidegger believed that the essence of things is only truly seen when they are made unfamiliar While a hammer is intact, one takes what it is for granted; only when it is broken does one contemplate what it really is. It is only truly in art that persons can understand what objects truly are, for the purpose of art is to defamiliarize objects and make the viewers contemplate them for what they truly are, an idea that is closely associated with formalism. Furthermore, the correct attitude to take toward a piece of art is utter passivity; one simply accepts what the art says.

The role of history in Heidegger's philosophy, while at first seemingly insightful, is actually simplistic and flawed. While an individual is intimately bound up in history, by "history" Heidegger does not mean the ebb and flow of nations and the development of new social structures. Rather, history is something entirely individual and experiential; history is one's personal history.

Heidegger raised, even if he did not fully solve, the problem of meaning and its relationship to the author and his social situation. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. was one philosopher who attempted to tackle this problem. Heavily influenced by Husserl, he also believed that the meaning of a text was something that existed in the author's mind before it was put in words. Meaning is something that is prior to and distinct from language. The meaning of a text, therefore, never changes, but it also may never be truly found. For, unlike phenomenologists, Hirsch admitted that multiple interpretations of a text were possible—the meaning of a text was rarely clear. While slightly more realistic, this

understanding of literature is flawed in the same way that Husserl's understanding of language is. It is impossible to separate meaning from language; it is impossible to "mean" something without putting that meaning into words.

However, Hirsch's literary theory is irretrievably authoritarian in nature. The reader is explicitly forbidden to provide his own meaning to the text. Such an act is considered to be a kind of trespassing on the property of the author. While Hirsch admits that there is no rational justification for giving the author this kind of authority, he claims it is necessary to give someone that authority or else a kind of anarchy would ensue, in which each individual would be free to provide his own meaning without restraint. His theory also assumes that absolute objectivity is possible. But objectivity is impossible— one is always viewing the world and history through the lens of one's society and language.

Hirsch's theory is a reaction against the "relativism" he saw developing as a result of the "historical" schools of interpretation spawned by the philosophies of Heidegger and others. He was very uncomfortable by the implication that the meaning of a text could change from one day to the next, and wanted to find a way to secure the meaning in a totally objective and unchanging way. However, it is obvious that language—and meaning—do not operate in this way. The same words can mean one thing in one context, but something quite different in another; the meaning of the words is not objective, but highly circumstantial and variable. It also obvious that meanings are not identical to the private intentions of the person expressing them; one cannot, for example, mean "frog" by saying the word "bird". Language is ultimately a social construct and, as a result, is something which is received, and not created, by the individual.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a literary theorist heavily influenced by Heidegger, understood this last insight and incorporated it into the substance of his literary theory. For him, the meaning of a text extends beyond just the intentions of the author and can, over time, develop into something much greater. It is impossible for a reader to approach a text in a totally objective manner and see the text for "what it is" in itself; rather, the reader is constantly engaged in a dialog with the past. The past is always interpreted through the present, but the present can also only be understood in light of the past. Moreover, while a reader always brings his own prejudices and values to a text, this does not at all distort or devalue his meaning. In fact, those prejudices are an aid to understanding the text, as the author, reader, text, and prejudices are all part of the same tradition in much the same way as all valid literature was part of Tradition for T.S. Eliot. It is through prejudices—which the reader inherits from his history—that he is able to understand his history. However, this theory assumes that there is a monolith, an unchanging tradition of which all authors are a part. It also tacitly assumes that the communication structures that make up that tradition have been benign, while many have been authoritarian and oppressive.

After Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser helped develop a new school of literary interpretation known as "reception theory". While the oldest schools of literary theory emphasized the role of the author and then later schools of theory emphasized the text, reception theory

placed the highest emphasis on the reader. Without the reader, reception theorists point out, there is no literature at all. All the author can do is provide cues and hints as to what the reader should imagine. In other words, it is ultimately the reader and not the author who creates the literary world. The author merely suggests it in his writings. How the reader interprets a text is determined by a variety of factors, including his understanding of literary conventions, personal experiences, and imagination. He uses these—and other tools—to fill in the "gaps" left by the author, whose text can only specify so much.

As a result of this intimate dialog between the reader and the text, Iser imagined that the reading of literature was the catalyst of profound personal change. By reading and engaging his own values and prejudices in the process, the reader would also have cause to reflect upon them and question them. The reader, therefore, would become more open-minded and thoughtful. However, only certain readers were capable of this transformation; a reader with deeply-held convictions may be too hard-headed to receive this benefit. However, this leads to a paradox: if literature produces open-minded individuals, but only open-minded individuals can receive the benefit of literature, it is unclear exactly what literature is meant to really accomplish.

Iser's literary theory is also less open than it at first appears to be. While Iser admits that multiple, equally valid interpretations of a text can be given, and that there is no one "true" interpretation, he does restrict this range to interpretations that provide "coherent" or "consistent" understandings of the text. However, there is no justifiable reason for this restraint and, in fact, even the author may not intend for his work to have a consistent meaning throughout, such as is the case with James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake.

However, there also can be, in some sense, too much openness in literary theory. One literary critic, also of the reception theory school, named Roland Barthes, focused primarily on modernist literature, which was less concerned with conventional linguistic conventions and allowed much more verbal freedom. According to Barthes, interpretation of the text is nearly impossible; rather, as the reader works his way through the jumbles of seemingly unrelated words, brief glimpses of meaning and images appear which disappear just as quickly.

A more realistic approach to literary analysis can be found somewhere between Iser and Barthes. While Iser places too much emphasis on the restraints a text imposes, Barthes overemphasizes the subjective experience of the reader. Readers for Barthes approach the text as individuals not embedded in a pre-existing social situation sharing a common ideology with other members of society. While Iser does acknowledge the importance of the reader's social character, he tends to ignore historical situation.

Reception theory in general raises a problem for literary criticism. If the literary work is not realized by the text itself, but only when the reader has "concretized" it into something complete, how can a literary critic analyze or discuss a piece of literature? After all, two readers will have two different understandings of a text, and it would be vain for one reader to urge his own reading upon the other.

As the history of literary theory up to this point has shown, the meaning of a literary work is not easily grasped. Some theorists, such as Hirsch and Fish, have attempted to define these meanings by various means. However, most students and scholars are willing to admit that texts admit of several readings, and these reads are largely informed by the assumptions and prejudices a reader brings to the text. Moreover, how a reader approaches a text is especially determined by his social and historical situation. As these facts are of the highest importance, how literary theory understands these elements extends beyond the analysis of literature to the evolution of society and culture.

# Chapter 3, Structuralism and Semiotics

## Chapter 3, Structuralism and Semiotics Summary and Analysis

While New American Criticism was able to attain some respect from academic institutions, as the North grew increasingly materialistic and scientific, its inexact methods excluded it from being considered a serious discipline. Northrop Frye, a Canadian theorist, attempted to correct this by combining the essence of New American Criticism—particularly, its formalist insistence on focusing on only the text itself—with a systematic, almost scientific methodology. He did this by claiming that through literary history, the same basic patterns and categories continually repeat themselves, and the literary critic can analyze literature simply be analyzing the categories into which a work falls. Frye also extended the formalism that was present in New American Criticism. While the New Critics were willing to allow that literature could convey something about the world, Frye was insistent that literature was so enclosed that it referred only to itself. Literature, then, is a kind of "collective utopian dreaming", which all civilizations have engaged in.

Like many literary theorists before him, Frye saw literature as a substitute for religion, which failed to achieve its goals. Literature is a way of freeing oneself, at least momentarily, from the perpetual bondage of history and allows the reader to "remember" the pre-industrial golden age. As all literature comes ultimately from the same source, the collective yearning of mankind, its message varies only slightly over time. All considered, Frye perceives the overall message of the sum of mankind's collection of literature to suggest a moderate political position precisely between the two dominant American political parties. Much like Matthew Arnold, Frye's understanding of literature would appear to amount to nothing more than a desire to spread his own political and social values.

While Frye's system of literary analysis could in some way be considered structuralist (for example, in the way in which it categorizes and systematizes the various kinds of stories), it lacked one essential element of structuralism. Structuralism, properly speaking, reduces a text to the relationships between its parts. The specific objects that occupy the parts in those relationships—for example, a father and a son or a hammer and a nail—do not ultimately matter. The types of relationships can take many forms in different texts, ranging from "opposition" to "equivalence".

Structuralist literary analysis was influenced heavily by the structuralist linguistic system of Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussure, language was composed of signifiers and signifieds. The signifier "cat", for example, signified the hairy four-legged pet. Saussure believed that linguistics would deteriorate if linguistics attempted to study the actual things signified by words; rather, all that was necessary was to study the relationship between signs. Structuralist literary analysis is nothing more than an application of this to literature. Just as Saussure ignored the meanings of words in favor

of the relationships between signs, so too do structuralists ignore the content of stories in favor of the relationships between elements.

Structuralism is connected in some ways with formalism, though important differences exist between the two schools of criticism. Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist, is one of the primary links between Russian formalism of the early twentieth century and modern-day structuralism. Jakobson classified the elements of a verbal act (whether it be spoken or written) according to their functions. Important for literary criticism, Jakobson considered the "poetic" function of communication to be that in which the message itself is the most important element, rather than what the message is conveying. In other words, poetry is self-conscious communication wherein the elements of the text are arranged in such a way as to be phonetically or syntactically interesting.

The literary school that developed around Jakobson, known as the Prague Structuralists, incorporated Saussurean linguistics into the framework of Russian Formalism. The Prague Structuralists kept the same emphasis on the estranging nature of language; the value of literature, according to them, was in how it made the reader reflect upon the actual process of language itself. Also like the Formalists, the Prague school emphasized the unity of the work and ignored anything considered external to it. However, unlike the Formalists, the Prague Structuralists understood the piece of literature not simply to be the text on the page, but rather a product both of the text itself and the interpretative process of the individual reader.

The Prague Structuralists come to be heavily influenced by semiotics, the study of signs. The semiotician studies the relations between various signs, between signs and what they signify, and so on. The parallel with the Prague form of structuralism is obvious, since all of the emphasis was on the relationship between the elements of the story—which are simply signs—and their relationship to one another.

Semiotics was developed in part by the Russian Yury Lotman, who especially worked on the application of semiotics to literature. According to Lotman, a poem was a very dense collection of information that was conveyed through the words on the page, the rhythm they create, and the similarities in form and sound. This fact made poetry, in a sense, a superior and more efficient form of conveying information, since these tools were not at the disposal of a person engaged in ordinary conversation. Since all of the meaning of a poem is perceived in the relationships between words—whether stylistically, phonetically, or in any other way—Lotman's theory was highly structuralist and implied that a work could only be understood as a unified whole. However, his theory is also closely connected with reception theory, as he does not believe that the analysis of a poem is complete if only the poem itself is considered. Rather, he understood, as did the reception theorists, that the poem is only fully realized in the mind of the reader.

The permanent effects of the rise of structuralism are many. First, structuralism results in a "de-mystification" of literature; unlike the Romantics, who believed that literature somehow captured the soul of the artist, literature is reduced to an almost mechanical

construct composed of discrete parts. Second, structuralism introduced the notion that language and meaning are not the products of individuals, but rather are constructs of society that predate any specific individual. Moreover, it is through these constructs that individuals interact with and understand the world; as a result, individuals with different languages will, naturally, understand the world in different ways. This causes an immense amount of trouble for any belief system that wishes to preserve the classical notion that the mind corresponds precisely with the world.

However, while structuralism did introduce these ideas, it did not bring them to full maturity. Structuralism does acknowledge that language is man's interface with the world, but it naively assumes that the basic operations of language are more or less universal and unchanging. While the arbitrary signs of language are highly variable— what the word for "cat", for example, varies from culture to culture—the basic relationship between signs remains constant. This is the assumption that underlies the work of Strauss and allows him to credibly maintain that the myths of all cultures are fundamentally the same. In other words, structuralism ignored the historical element of language and individuals.

But structuralism should be credited with rightfully taking the individual out of the center of the linguistic picture. Saussure and the structuralist literary critics were correct in their emphasis that it is not individuals who create meanings; rather, the structures with which they interact are the true source of meaning, namely their languages. Languages cannot be the product of individuals, since all interaction between individuals require language. All signs in a language depend upon all other signs and no sign can be understood in isolation; language, therefore, cannot have a "first sign". However true this understanding of language is, the structuralists also went too far. While the individual is not in the center of language, he is still involved in it, and in their study of language, both reader and author seem to disappear entirely and all that is left is some abstract literary structure.

In reaction against structuralism, a new school of linguistics and literary analysis developed that aimed to change the emphasis from "language" to "discourse". Language was identified as the more or less objective set of signs and their relations, abstracted from social contexts—such as who is speaking and who is listening. Discourse, on the other hand, wants to understand the use of language as it actually occurs—among individuals enmeshed in certain cultural, social, and political systems. Mikhail Bakhtin was one theorist who proposed these ideas. He believed that true literary analysis involved not merely the study of signs, but also the study of the history of the signs and their uses by various social and economic groups. What exactly a sign meant, Bakhtin pointed out, was often a battlefield among various groups in a society, each trying to give the word a meaning of their own. Therefore, language was the result of social and political conflict in society and hardly the kind of objective, unvarying entity which structuralist theorists imagined. Likewise, following the insights of recent theorists, Bakhtin rejected any notion that language was an event either totally isolated from society or totally isolated from an individual. Rather, language was the means by which an individual interacted with his society and world at large. As a result, human

consciousness comes to be seen as a kind of product of language and, therefore, of one's society.

The failure of structuralism is ultimately the result of the same flaw that condemned other literary theories: it attempted to use literature as a replacement for religion. The way in which it envisioned literature replacing religion, of course, was different from Romanticism or New American Criticism; for structuralism, the substitute for religion was science, and, therefore, literary theory needs to be wholly objective and methodological in its approach. As a result, the subject—the reader himself—must disappear from the picture. All that is left is an empty and fictitious system that supposes a reader can read a text and ignore all of his cultural, social, and economical values, judgments, and prejudices. Structuralism persists today only as a way for literary departments to justify their discipline by showing that it can be "scientific".

# Chapter 4, Post-Structuralism

## Chapter 4, Post-Structuralism Summary and Analysis

Structuralist linguistics relied on the notion that the significance of a sign was determined by the fact that it was not any other sign; for example, "cat" has significance and meaning precisely because it is not "cap". In this way, Saussure believed that a kind of perfect correspondence between exactly one sign and one signified thing could be established. However, this perfect correspondence is not possible, since "cat" is not only what it is because it is not "cap"; it is also not "hat" or "mat". In other words, there is an infinite complexity to the meaning of the word "cat" and, as such, its exact meaning cannot be fully grasped. Moreover, the meaning of a word is wholly depend upon its context and existence among other words in a sentence. At the same time as its meaning is changed by the other words in the sentence, the meaning of those other words in the sentence are also changed. Language, then, is not the kind of stable, discrete entity which structuralists believed it be, but rather a complex and mysterious web of relations between signs which can never be quite pinned down. These are the insights of the school of thought which identified itself as post-structuralist and was largely developed around the ideas of French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Another implication of this fact—that the meaning of a word is not something wholly contained in it—is that a person is really never truly in touch with himself. As has been shown in previous chapters, language is not a mere external tool a person uses; rather a person's entire being is permeated and produced by language. Language is not only how a person interacts with the world; it is also how a person interacts with himself. However, if language is, by necessity, vague and uncertain, then it implies that a person can never even fully understand himself, let alone others. Some have thought that this gap might be crossed by the use of vocalized speech rather than writing, but this rests on the false assumption that there is something unique about vocalized speech as opposed to written speech. Vocalized speech is, in fact, just as vague as written speech, as it is composed of the same signs as written language.

Western philosophy has always sought for an ultimate ground for the meaning of its language and thought, an entity which pre-exists and is the foundation for all subsequent meaning, whether it be God or some other kind of transcendental, abstract notion like "liberty" or "democracy". However, as the theory of language presented in this book shows, such a meaning is impossible, as all meaning is dependent upon existence in some already existing linguistic structure. Any system which began with this kind of foundation Derrida described as "metaphysical." While flawed inherently, metaphysical systems are necessary, at least in the present day. However, these metaphysical foundations for meaning can always be deconstructed and shown to the product of a pre-existing system of meaning. For example, if a society is male-dominated, it might be thought that men are the foundation of all meaning within that society. However, the identity of male is dependent upon the identity of female—a male

is defined as simply what a woman is not. Without a woman to contrast himself with, a man cannot define what he is.

The development of post-structuralism can be seen to start with the work of Roland Barthes, whose influence in the development of reception theory has been discussed. Barthes was influenced heavily by many literary schools, including reception theory, structuralism, and phenomenology. His methodology relied entirely on the analysis of language according to Saussurean linguistics. He believed that a "healthy" or good sign was one which emphasized its own artificialness. This claim is largely politically motivated, for political systems often try to legitimize themselves by making their existence seem natural, rather than man-made. Similarly, the realist literary school believed that texts should be written in a way such that the true content shined through, rather than the author's intentions or biases; in other words, the style should be transparent, precisely what Barthes believed was impossible

While Barthes was committed to the view that literature could be studied objectively early in his career, he gradually came to the realization that no language could be objective and pure and, therefore, no analysis—which would necessarily be composed of language—could be objective, either. He came to believe, also, the fundamental post-structuralist belief that there was no ultimate, pure basis for language. As a result of these insights, Barthes develops the view that literary criticism is not at all objective but rather a kind of free-form attempt at understanding and giving meaning to a text. Much like words in general are embedded in a complex nest of relationships with one another which are far too complicated to comprehend, so are literary texts overflowing with possible meanings and interpretations. The role of the critic is to analyze and bring these out, all the while understanding that they are as much his product as they are the author's.

The literary movement known as modernism served as the catalyst for the development of structuralism and post-structuralism. Structuralism developed from the extreme interest in language that developed in the late-19th and early 20th centuries. Many understood language to largely have been appropriated for the uses of industrial capitalism and science and it was difficult to imagine how such a language could any longer be employed for the production of literature. Further, as writing assumed a common ideological and cultural background, the production of art seemed impossible in the shattered cultures and divided ideologies of the 20th century. Some responded to these problems by simply ignoring the unfortunate realities and attempt to write without any meaning or reference; in other words, to write only about what is being written and ignore altogether what is meant. Others responded to it by attempting to liberate their language from social pollutions, but this proved to be an impossible task. According to Barthes, all producers of literature were in some way conspiring with and reaffirming the division between classes and social groups, since literature itself, something always tailored towards the empowered, rich, and educated, is an embodiment of that division.

Post-structuralism evolves as a reaction to the failure of the students uprising in Paris in 1968. The students, primarily motivated by Marxist ideology, had started a revolt that they hoped would end up in the empowerment of the working-class; ultimately, however,

they were crushed by police and military forces. Since direct, physical conflict proved to be ineffective, the revolutionaries decided to subvert the system through language rather than open opposition. Just as the students had opposed centralized systems of political oppression, the post-structuralists targeted any philosophy which was in any way systematic or coherent. Post-structuralism developed, in many circles, into a kind of extreme skepticism. Since post-structuralism claimed that reality was a construct of language, it became difficult to see how reality itself could ever really be perceived. Those who believed in any form of truth in reality were stigmatized by academic circles as conservative and backwards.

Post-structuralism also had its counterpart in the English-speaking world. Paul de Man, and other faculty members at Yale, developed a theory that the essence of literate was that it constantly undermined itself and pointed towards its own meaninglessness and emptiness. This very fact actually constitutes the definition of all literature, for all other forms of writing attempt to pass off what they say as meaningful and true. While economic works or newspaper articles must be deconstructed and shown to lack any meaning, literature is unique in insisting on its own meaninglessness. While the Yale school different in many obvious ways from their predecessors, New American Criticism, the practical results of the schools were very similar. The New American Critics saw poetry as a world to escape to and contemplate while ignoring the real world; in like manner, by pointing out the meaninglessness of everything, the Yale school of post-structural criticism is characterized by the same indifference and inaction.

The difficulty with this American post-structuralism is the same difficulty which Bakhtin pointed out regarding structuralism: focusing only on language and ignoring discourse. A string of words on a page, abstracted from any context, is ultimately meaningless; but understood as part of a language which embodies a social reality and is intimately involved with everyday life, the words' meanings, while never fully clear, can at least be glimpsed. Moreover, when meaning is understood in this way, it allows one to see what else besides just literature and definition is involved, such as social and political organizations and struggles.

Though post-structuralism evolved—or perhaps degenerated—into this extreme skepticism and nihilism, it would be unfair to credit Derrida with this. While he was the founder in many ways of post-structuralism, he was also a strong critic of its later forms. The aim of his work was not to undermine all meaning and truth; rather, his goal was primarily political. He wanted to show what the existing political and social structures were built upon—namely, nothing but force and oppression.

The feminist movement is one lasting result of the post-structuralist movement, even as most of its followers have disappeared. The feminist movement rejected much of the Marxist thought which permeated the left in the 1960s and 1970s on the grounds that it focused entirely on economic status and could give no explanation for the marginalization of women which, while in some ways economic, extended beyond what was purely material. The woman's movement is also not confined only to helping the status of women—though some proponents do tend in that direction. Rather, in

objecting to forms of social organization which allow men to hold positions of power over women, they are objecting to the existence of those positions of power as such.

# Chapter 5, Psychoanalysis

## Chapter 5, Psychoanalysis Summary and Analysis

The book so far has focused on the political and economic developments of the twentieth century as the dominant influences on philosophy and literary theory. However, this focus must be balanced with an understanding of the changes that went on at the personal level for many people living during this period, and Sigmund Freud is the pioneer of that field. Freud recognized in all people a conflict between two motivations—the pleasure principle, which makes a person want to do what is pleasant to him, and the reality principle, which makes a person want to do what is necessary to survive—namely, work. The reality principle forces a person to repress their pleasure principle, but undue repression of this can lead to what Freud calls neurosis. As all human beings are forced to work, all human beings are, to varying degrees, neurotic. One way of coping with unfulfilled desires is to redirect those energies towards something that is highly praised or valued by society. Thus, a painter may redirect unfulfilled sexual desires into creating a painting.

The reason why humans seem to universally suffer from neurosis while other animals apparently do not, is related to the fact that humans, unlike other animals, are born entirely dependent upon parents. While this dependence begins at first as entirely material, it develops into more than that as the child matures. Breast-feeding begins as a simple way to be fed, but over time it develops into a pleasurable activity, which is the beginning of the child's development of sexuality. What began as a basic survival instinct is redirected into the achievement of sexual goals. Following this stage—known as the "oral" stage—is the anal stage. As the child grows older, the anal stage begins, in which the child has to cope with conflicts between retaining and expelling feces. This stage is connected with more general desires to control and manipulate. The final stage of childhood development is the phallic stage, in which sexual libido begins to develop with which the child must cope. It should be noted that these stages can and do overlap.

While the child is still developing, it is wholly under the sway of the pleasure principle and, as a result, could not be considered to be a true citizen able to work. The beginning of its emergence from this total dependence is the Oedipus complex. As the child matures and becomes more sexually aware, it looks first to its parents as objects of attraction—a little boy desires sexual union with his mother, and a little girl desires sexual union with her father. As a result, the parent of the same sex becomes an object of jealousy and rivalry. It is out of fear of castration—of being turned a girl—that the little boy rids himself of the desire to sexually unite with his mother and accepts that he may one day at least be in the same position as his father. By denying himself of this, he has accepted the reality principle and emerges from the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex's importance in Freud's theory should not be passed over. By finally accepting the reality principle, the child is making the first step toward accepting his role in society as a responsible member, toward accepting moral obligations, and toward being part of a larger culture.

While it may seem that the resolution of the Oedipal stage is more or less complete and without further difficulty, problems persist in the part of the mind known as the unconscious. The unconscious holds all of the repressed, guilty desires that the child cannot bear to entertain consciously. The division between the conscious and unconscious results in all people being, to greater or lesser extents, psychically divided. The unconscious is accessed in a few ways. The primary way the unconscious is accessed is through dreams. The unconscious expresses its desires in dreams through metaphors and symbols, since if they were expressed too explicitly they would be so jarring as to wake the dreamer up. The unconscious can also be manifested in accidental speech, such as slips of the tongue or mis-readings of signs.

However, the most harmful way in which the unconscious is expressed is through mental illness. Some unconscious desires are so strong that they literally try to force themselves into the conscious mind but the ego stops them from making it; this conflict is neurosis. The subject then finds ways to compromise by simultaneously providing an outlet for the desires while also preventing the complete acceptance of them. This neurosis is, ultimately, according to Freud, the result of unresolved conflicts during the developmental stages of childhood, usually centered around the resolution, or lack of resolution, of the Oedipus complex. Psychoanalysis is the method of therapy that attempts to uncover and resolve those conflicts. The patient cures his neurosis by transferring the unresolved developmental conflict onto the analyst, who then redefines and helps the patient resolve it.

While Freud believed ultimately that all psychological problems could be resolved through reason and experience, it would be incorrect to think that he was a rationalist, for he was well aware of how powerful the forces of self-deception could be. He was also some what pessimistic about the human race, as evidenced by his claim that humans are more or less completely dominated by competing drives. He even identified a drive called Thanatos, which was simply the desire to die to return to the state of non-experience in which the ego could no longer be hurt. Freud believed that the ego was continually assaulted by modern society and, while his beliefs were often conservative and even authoritarian, he did identify modern capitalist institutions as a source of great misery for mankind. At some points, he even seems to have toyed with some changes in the institutions of private property and the modern nation.

Many objections can be raised against Freudianism, and indeed have been. The first and most obvious criticism is that it seems impossible to test Freud's theory, as he followed a nineteenth century model of science that placed less emphasis on empirical evidence and more emphasis on armchair reasoning. Second, Freud may be guilty of transferring his own biases and prejudices into his work, as is evident from his characterization of women as passive, immoral, and self-obsessed.

Others criticize Freud for being overly individualistic and ignoring the role of society and culture in the development of an individual. However, Freud's theory of the competition between the pleasure and reality principles supplies a fruitful analysis for the origin of civilizations. Namely, civilization can be understood as a way of redirecting unfulfilled desires stemming from developmental conflicts. In this way, Freud provides a material

and economic history for the creation of civilization itself and therefore situates his theory very much within history and society. While this explanation is not always helpful —since it assumes, for example, a uniformity of certain social factors like the family and what exactly "childhood" is—it has been picked up on by feminists who have noted that the oppression of women is universal in the history of civilization.

The French thinker Jacques Lacan is one successor of Freud whose work has been popular among feminists, even though Lacan himself was not sympathetic to the women's movement. Lacan attempted to adapt Freudian psychology to understand the experience of humans in general, and especially their relationship to language, which brings in Lacan's relevance to literary theory. According to Lacan, development begins with the "imaginary" state, in which the child does not identify itself as a unified being. In this period, notions of self are manifested in many different objects, shifting rapidly, and often incorporating especially its mother's body on whom the child depends. In the "mirror" stage, the child begins to contemplate this notion of self more intensely and gradually begins to identify a unity to which it corresponds. The ego is the process by which the child finally realizes this ultimately fictional sense of unity.

The Oedipal stage occurs in Lacan's account more or less as it does in Freud's, with some key differences. First of all, the Oedipal stage is emphasized as the point in which the child accepts its gender role in society; as a consequence of conforming to the social taboo against incest, the child is incorporating itself into the customs and practices of its culture.

The most important way in which Lacan's account differs, though, is that it understands development in linguistic terms. Much like there is a perfect correspondence between a signifier and signified in Saussurean linguistics, so too is there a correspondence between the child and the object in the "mirror"—the object that he perceives to be himself. Likewise, the child must learn sexual differences through negation—that is, it must perceive its own gender by entrance of a third character into the picture. It is no longer only the child and its mother, but the father enters into the situation in the Oedipal stage. His presence causes the child to realize its gender and accept the corresponding roles in its society.

The learning of language represents an unfortunate step into continual dissatisfaction according to Lacan. As all signs are defined only in relationship to those signs which they are not—and, therefore, ultimately lack any meaning of their own, as was shown in the chapter on Post-Structuralism—learning a language amounts to a surrendering to meaninglessness and emptiness.

The unconscious is also manifested in different ways on Lacan's theory. While on the Freudian account, the unconscious manifests itself through slips of the tongue and reams, Lacan, a post-structuralist, sees the unconscious manifested in all linguistic acts. As words are necessarily vague, ambiguous, and of uncertain meaning, the unconscious works its way into every utterance and, as a result, a person never says exactly what they mean, and unconscious desires are always underneath the surface.

Lacan was also interested in what he described as the "act of enunciation". This act is a generic term for any kind of act of speech—whether spoken or written—and is distinct from the actual speech itself. In certain forms of literature, the act of enunciation is meant to be ignored altogether, such as realist literature. The result is an overemphasis on the content of the sentence, and the information which it purports to provide, and underemphasis on the fact that it is constructed by someone. Modernist literature, on the other hand, makes the fact that it is an act of enunciation part of the literature itself.

Freudian analysis can be helpful in the interpretation of literature, and this can been especially in the case of D.H. Lawrence's novel "Sons and Lovers", in which a character shows all of the signs of a very poorly resolved Oedipus complex. The work, however, also shows that Freudian psychoanalysis is in harmony with other forms of literary analysis, such as social and economic analysis, as "Sons and Lovers" touches directly on issues of class differences and the tensions which they create.

Psychoanalytical analysis of literature can focus on one of four objects: the author, the contents, the form, or the reader. While the first two are the most common objects for Freudian literary analysts, they are also the least fruitful. However, when turned to the other two objects, psychoanalysis can be very useful in understanding literature. Freud's work on in the interpretation of dreams provides a helpful parallel for understanding literature. According to Freud, a dream is constructed from unconscious wishes and desires that are organized together into some coherent fashion. In a similar fashion, a work of literature can be understood as composed of certain elements—like language, the author's worldview, dominant themes—which are then organized together by the text itself. Just as the dream can be interpreted and the underlying unconscious desires can be made manifest, so too can the literary work be reduced.

For example, classical literary structure is often derived from the simple story of some object (whether it be a person or just a thing) being lost and then being returned. These stories are pleasant to readers because they satisfactorily resolve the developmental struggles that all children go through: the "loss" of being in the womb, the "loss" of feces during the anal developmental stage, the "loss" of the mother in the Oedipus complex. While, at least for many readers, these conflicts are never settled in real-life, a kind of gratification can be obtained by having them resolved completely in literature. The reciprocal nature of the loss and the return should be noted. The loss is only tolerable with the knowledge that it will be followed by a return, and the return is only pleasurable in light of the fact that it could be lost again.

Julia Kristeva is a Freudian feminist theorist of language who combines a study of language with the political ends of the women's movement. Following Lacan in identifying the resolution of the Oedipus complex as the beginning of one's entrance into gendered society and language, Kristeva sees language as a predominantly patriarchal and oppressive of women. In the pre-Oedipal stage, which is also pre-linguistic, the child has something like a language, which Kristeva refers to as "semiotic"—it is made up by an unorganized flow of drives and impulses which do not yet have meaning. The semiotic is repressed when the child learns language, but something of its nature is still detectable in the structure, rhythm, and sound of language, and thus it is a particularly

feminist project to attempt to undermine the symbolic or linguistic order (which is male-dominated) with the semiotic order (which is ungendered by virtue of being pre-linguistic). The influence of Kristiva's theory can be found in the writings of Virginia Woolf and especially James Joyce.

Freudian psychoanalysis also sheds light on what may seem like an obvious point, but which most literary schools want to avoid: people read literature because it is pleasurable to do so. This follows from the general Freudian point that the motivations for any action in humans beings is the desire for pleasure and the fear of pain. Further, insofar as insights from psychoanalysis may shed light on the human condition as a whole—it identifies what the causes of happiness and misery in general are. The work of Wilhelm Reich, a German psychoanalyst, has explored exactly this subject to attempt to determine exactly what the limits are of man's capacity to repress his desires in modern capitalist, industrial society.

# Conclusion, Political Criticism

## Conclusion, Political Criticism Summary and Analysis

This book has attempted to show the intimate connection between literary theory and politics. While many literary theories are not explicitly political, all literary theories are subject and permeated by the political and social ideologies of their days; therefore, it is those who attempt to be explicitly non-political and objective who do the most harm by disguising ideology as science. It is this inseparable connection between the world of politics and the world of literature which gives literary theory its importance in an age of seemingly imminent nuclear holocaust and severe economic and social injustice. And, as most literary theory for the past two centuries has been characterized chiefly by a desire to be unpolitical and escape the modern world, it has paradoxically reaffirmed the very doctrine that has led to the socially and politically oppressive forces that exist today: namely, the notion that there is the possibility of a disconnected individual who can escape from his social existence. This individuality is the driving force behind authoritarian capitalism and the military state.

To return to the problem brought up in the introduction, defining literary theory is a difficult task. There is no unity in methodology, as any literary theorist employs several, and there is no unity in what studies, as literature is a constantly moving target throughout history. While some would think that a precise definition of literary theory is unnecessary, such a view presents the problem of attempting to combine what are ultimately conflicting methodologies, as attractive as the pluralism might seem. Some critics try to reject literary theory altogether and "just read the text", but no critic is without his theory; even if he is not aware of them, the critic always brings certain assumptions and prejudices to the book that he reads. However, the ideologies of these critics are impossible to attack, precisely because they insist that they do not have an ideology.

The true reason why this kind of methodological pluralism—the combining of multiple literary methods—is impossible is because the methodologies all present different ideological worldviews and are thus, at bottom, incompatible with one another. Liberal humanism, the dominant social view in academia today, is tolerated and even supported by the capitalist structure of modern society since, even though it does hold views that run contrary to those necessary to sustain the industrial state, it is more or less ineffectual and ignored. These liberal humanists are really instruments of the state: though they may believe and even teach doctrines that oppose the excesses of the modern political system, they still teach and enforce a way of thinking and writing that underlies and reinforces that very system.

Modern literary theory also suffers from the difficulty that its supposed object—literature —is not one that can be credibly thought to be anything other than an arbitrary canon laid down by academic hands. After all, most literary methods will apply equally to literature and non-literature, and this begs the question of what makes literary methods

particularly literary. This is a great embarrassment to the academic establishment, as it shows simply how authoritarian and arbitrary it is: "literature"—as defined by them—is the object of literary theory—as defined by them—and nothing else is the object, because they say so. However, what counts as literature is little more than a function of their servility to the ruling class.

Any attempt to move beyond this paradigm of literary theory, however, would spell the end of it, for literary theorists would be forced to cope with the fact that there is nothing distinguishing about their discipline and that it is really nothing more than an extension of the existing political and social ideologies of modern society. In fact, this realization is precisely what literary theory as a whole ought to do—acknowledge that there really is no such thing as literary theory. In place of literary theory there should be a more generalized science that hopes to understand what effects a text or discourse achieves and how it achieves them. This science has existed for hundreds of years in fact, under the name of rhetoric.

The use of this science would be to show that literature—and all forms of discourse— are intimately bound up with all sorts of prejudices, values, and judgments inherited from one's society and language. Ignoring this fact is the great flaw in modern liberal humanism—by ignoring the political nature of all discourse, they are submissively accepting and going along with the political ends of the ruling powers. Ignoring this is at odds with their explicit belief that the purpose of studying literature is self-enrichment and growth. However, they are naïve to think that such self-enrichment and growth can ever occur without changes being made to the political and social structures, which changes rely first of all upon the recognition of the causes of these structures.

The new rhetorical science ought to firmly establish its goal as nothing less than the transformation of society for the benefit of its citizens. As all forms of discourse are relevant to and causative of the current political order, there is no reason why the study of "literature" in the classical sense should be considered any more important than the analysis of children's shows or advertisements, as these perhaps even more potently perpetuate the ideology of industrial capitalism. This goal would necessitate a reformation of academic institutions that are woefully uninterested at the present time.

This new movement ought to target, at least at first, four specific areas. First, it must address the growing cultural imperialism that is afflicting developing nations. Overturning the customs and languages of cultures that have existed for centuries and where cultural identity is vitally important to an individual is just as imperial as exploiting them for labor and resources. Second, the movement should align itself with the feminist movement, which has shown great fruit in the deconstruction of discourse to expose the underlying oppression and power structures. Third, the movement should spend great effort in transforming the so-called "culture industry"—those media apparatuses that perpetuate so much of modern capitalist ideology. Finally, the still-young working-class writing movement ought to be encouraged and emphasized as it represents a fundamental blow to one of the embarrassments of the literary world: its intimate connection with the upper, ruling classes of society throughout history. While these four areas do not mean that other, more traditional studies cannot be continued—

such as the analysis of Shakespeare—it may be a result of their study that the value of studying Hamlet is questioned and that literature, as such, might fade away. However, if such were to happen, it may be necessary in order for a true socialist transformation to occur.

# Characters

## Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes began his literary career as a member of the reception theory movement in a particularly radical form. Barthes focused mainly on modernist literature which was often devoid of conventional considerations of structure and form; it often would appear to a casual reader as a kind of jumble of words arranged in no particular order. Barthes thought this was a kind of archetype for literature, as he believed along with other reception theorists that the true literary product was not made by the author but by the reader. The reading process then can be described as a chaotic peeping into a sea of conflicting, ephemeral meanings which briefly appear and then disappear again. Given his emphasis on the role of the reader, these meanings need not have been intended by the author at all, but may be largely the product of the reader's own imagination.

Later in his life, Barthes serves as a transitional figure from structuralism to post-structuralism. While never fitting exactly into either camp, Barthes's early work shows strong structuralist tendencies of attempting to show that the true meaning of a work consists in the interplay among its various elements. However, his heavy emphasis on language leads him to investigate the way in which literature presents itself as artificial; or, in the case of some types of literature, the way in which it tries to disguise that fact. He sees a parallel between the relationship of artificial signs in language and what they represent and the "artificial signs" in literature and what they represent. In both cases, the relationship is arbitrary, and making that explicit is the mark of "healthy" literature.

This insight into the arbitrary relationship between language and reality leads Barthes to question the possibility of literary criticism at all. He followed Saussure in believing that all linguistic signs are defined by other linguistic signs. However, if this is true, then there is no fundamental source of meaning for language and it is, at the bottom, meaningless. If language is meaningless, then literary criticism—which depends on the notion that there is some meaning in the literature it criticizes—becomes difficult. This revolutionizes Barthes's own literary attitudes and his "criticisms" cease to be analytical and assume an entirely creative nature which consists entirely in bringing out meanings from inherently meaningless texts. These ideas are the precursors to post-structuralism as formulated by Jacques Derrida.

## Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold was an Englishman during the nineteenth-century who promoted the production and consumption of English literature for explicitly practical, authoritarian ends. Arnold believed that the promotion of English literature was the key to creating political unity in England. The Church of England had grown weak and was no longer effective at unifying the country. In light of revolutionary attitudes that had only recently

washed across Europe, Arnold greatly desired to maintain the political and economic privilege of the aristocracy, of which he was a member.

Literature, he believed, could promote this end in several ways. First, it would distract the working-class from its hardships. Second, as reading is an individual activity, it would reduce the amount of assembly among the citizens, as assembly could lead to political action, or even revolution. Finally, by specifically promoting English literature, it would provide a center around which sentiments of nationalism could be nurtured.

Arnold is important for illustrating Eagleton's point about the political nature of literature. No historical figure is more explicit about using literature as a means of establishing or maintaining a specific power structure. Arnold, thus, is an extreme example of the general character of literature according to Eagleton's theory.

# F.R. Leaves

F.R. Leaves is a founding member of the "Scrutiny" movement, along with Q.D. Leaves, which develops in early twentieth century England.. The Leavisian school of literary criticism is notable for its success in establishing the study of English as the prominent discipline in English academia. Leaves believed that literature was the medicine with which to cure the spiritual crisis that was the consequence of the events of the early twentieth century. Mankind had lost its direction and felt hopeless. The only place where the true spark of human life was contained was in literature. By reading literature, he believed, a person would be transformed and turned into a better, more open-minded kind of person.

In this belief, Leaves was somewhat of a political activist. By arguing that mankind was spiritually lifeless, he was implicitly condemning the institutions that took that life away: industrial capitalism, the modern nation-state, and militarization. Likewise, being a member of his movement meant more than being simply a student of literature; it meant taking part in what was at the time a radical political movement. However, despite these political judgments, the Leavisians were decidedly politically inactive. They believed that all the necessary transformation would take place through literary education, education that would necessarily only reach a tiny minority of the English population.

# Ferdinand de Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure is a French linguist who revolutionized the field and had a profound impact upon the study of literature for all subsequent literary theory. Saussure's linguistic theory was known as "structuralist linguistics" because, rather than examining the actual content of language as it was used, it focused on the structure of language itself. Saussure distinguished, for example, between the "signifier" and the "signified". The first would correspond to the word "cat" and the second would correspond to the actual four-legged pet. What gives a particular signifier its meaning is the fact that it is not other signifiers—"cat" means what it does because it is not "cap" or "mat". In this way, the set of all linguistic modifiers is carved up in such a way that each

signifier corresponds to exactly one signified. Furthermore, Saussure also stressed that the fact that a particular signifier corresponded to a particular signified was entirely arbitrary.

Saussure's linguistic theory has profound implications on subsequent literary theories. The structuralist literary theory is a direct result of applying Saussurian linguistics to literature. Just as Saussure was interested only in the structure of language, the structuralist literary theorist only analyzed the structure of the literature. Likewise, just as all linguistic signifiers have meaning only in relation to other signifiers, so too elements in a piece of literature only have meaning in relationship to one another.

## Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud is an Austrian thinker whose writings form the basis for the scientific study of psychology. Freud believed that all of humanity was psychologically split between what he called the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The pleasure principle is what causes a person to want to do what he finds pleasurable and satisfying. The reality principle is the realization that work must be done in order to survive. The reality principle thus must repress the pleasure principle, otherwise it would be impossible to do unpleasant but necessary work. Neurosis—or mental illness— arises when the repression of the pleasure principle becomes too extreme and the person literally can no longer tolerate it.

Freud believes that the source of these conflicts is ultimately development. During childhood, a person faces several conflicts which must be resolved. The most important of these conflicts is the Oedipus complex, in which the child finds himself sexually attracted to his mother and correspondingly jealous of and in rivalry with his father. The child eventually suppresses this sexual attraction out of an implicit fear that his father will castrate him. Up until this point, the child has been operating entirely on the pleasure principle—all of his bodily needs are provided for him and he is not required to work. However, by this act of giving up his mother as an object of sexual desire, he is accepting the reality principle and becoming a part of society. Most neuroses, according to Freud, develop as a result of the Oedipus complex not being adequately resolved.

Freud's psychological methodology, known as psychoanalysis, has been imported into literary analysis as a way of understanding the intentions of the author, the interaction between characters, the form of the literature, and even the reaction of readers. According to Eagleton, its most important contribution to literary theory is in the third type of analysis, formal analysis.

## Karl Marx

Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist, and political theorist in the nineteenth century who developed the socialist political model known as communism. While Marx himself did not play any direct role in literary theory, Eagleton relies on his insights throughout the book. Eagleton is himself a socialist, as he mentions in the conclusion to

the book, and employs Marx's analysis of relationship between social classes to understand the relationship between the political ruling class and the ideology it perpetuates through literature.

## Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida is a French philosopher whose ideas form the basis for the philosophical system known as post-structuralism. Derrida relied heavily upon the ideas of Saussure and Barthes. His basic goal in philosophy was to use language to "deconstruct" systems that he described as "metaphysical". A metaphysical system is one which assumes that there is some ultimate ground for meaning, upon which all other words receive their meaning. However, according to post-structuralism, there is no such ultimate ground for meaning. However, political and social systems attempt to build the illusion of such a foundation in order to gain control; therefore, Derrida aimed to expose these political systems as simply that, systems based on illusions.

## T.S. Eliot

T.S. Eliot is an American literary theorist and author who immigrated to England and influenced literary theory significantly before returning to America. While Eliot played a large role in the establishment of New American Criticism, he held many unique views. Eliot proposed a radical re-evaluation of the history of English literature on the basis that it had been tainted by individualist philosophical systems such as Protestantism and liberalism. Thus, figures which had previously been exalted, such as Milton, were cast down, and other, more obscure figures—even from outside of Europe—were elevated in their place. All true literature, Eliot believed, belonged to a mysterious force he referred to as "Tradition". Furthermore, it was through the contemplation and study of this Tradition in literature that mankind could be restored to the golden days of the past, a message which was welcomed by many during the turbulent twentieth century.

## Jacques Lacan

Jacques Lacan is a French psychoanalyst who combined the work of Sigmund Freud with many of insights about language which developed during the twentieth century. On Lacan's re-reading of Freud, the self is a fictitious construct that the ego develops during an early developmental stage known as the "mirror stage"—named such since it is during this period during which the child reflects upon what it is. Another notable addition to Freud's theory is that, according to Lacan, it is the resolution of the Oedipus complex that subjects a person to the social structures which exist, including the dominant gender roles of that society. This happens through the acceptance of language, which is ultimately a construct of those same social powers and bears their mark throughout.

Lacan is popular among many feminist thinkers for his thoughts on gender roles, even though Lacan himself was unsympathetic to the woman's movement.

# Julie Kristeva

Julia Kristeva is a feminist philosopher who borrows heavily from the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. She believed that language was an intrinsically male-dominated and sexist force, following Lacan's claim that it is through the acceptance of language that people are subjected to gender roles. Language, therefore, is a tool of male domination and feminine oppression. While language can never be altogether abandoned, Kristeva suggests the subversion of language by use of the semiotic order. The semiotic is the pre-Oedipal pseudo-language which consists of the chaotic mixture of drives and impulses in the child's mind. Since this semiotic "language" is pre-Oedipal, it is non-gendered and therefore not subject to the same sexist influences as language. The semiotic is still present to some extent in language and can be detected particularly in the rhythm, phonetic qualities, and meter of language; therefore, it is especially present in poetry.

# Objects/Places

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical system that was developed by German Edmund Husserl against the background of what Husserl perceived as the degenerate state of twentieth century philosophy. Philosophers were divided into two camps. On the one hand, there were empiricists who were obsessed with concrete facts and refused to acknowledge any universal truths. On the other, there were the subjectivists who denied any notion of objective truth and subordinated everything to fleeting personal experience. Phenomenology, conversely, promised to provide a firm basis on which all other truths could rest upon.

Phenomenology did not begin with the assumption that objects exist as they are perceived, or even that they exist at all. Rather, phenomenology focused exclusively on the experiences of perception itself, what it called the "phenomena". Through careful contemplation and study of these phenomena, one could come to perceive their universal essences—those characteristics which were permanent and unchanging about them.

Literary theorists in Husserl's time adapted phenomenological methodology to the study of literature. Much like the philosopher could contemplate an object and attempt to bring out its interior essence, so too could the reader contemplate a piece of literature and extract its meaning—which was simply a mirror image of the author's intention in writing it.

## English Literature

English literature is the focal point of Eagleton's first chapter and is an extended example of how literature is used to serve political ends. English literature begins as a way of affirming upper-class values and is later used by Matthew Arnold as a way of culturally unifying England. After the World War I, English finally gains respect as a serious academic study through the work of F.R. Leavis and others.

## Women's Movement

The Women's Movement refers to the decentralized political activity aimed at creating an equal status for women in society. The women's movement claims that the social and political structures are inherently sexist and that they should be reformed or altogether abolished. Many feminists utilize literary theories to point out cases of sexist ideology or to perpetuate their own goals.

## New American Criticism

New American Criticism is the first school of literary criticism to receive respect from academic institutions in America. New American Criticism is heavily influenced by the beliefs of T.S. Eliot and, to a lesser degree, of F.R. Leaves. According to New American Criticism, each piece of literature is an organic whole that requires no outside resources to analyze and understand. It is a kind of independent unity which is an object of contemplation. The result of this contemplation is the instilling of a kind of humility which leads one to accept the world as it is, flawed though it may be.

## Structuralist Literary Criticism

Structuralist literary criticism is the application of Saussure's linguistic insights to the analysis of literature. Structuralists believed that the key to analyzing literature was to ignore the actual content of the text and focus instead on the abstract relationships between the various elements. Thus, the "structure" of the literary work become the most important element.

## Post-Structuralism

Post-structuralism was a linguistic, philosophical, and political movement that developed in France in the 1960s, largely from the work of Jacques Derrida and from the failed student revolt in Paris in 1968. Realizing that their political ends could not be realized through physical conflict, socialists in France decided to subvert the existing social order through the deconstruction and refutation of any kind of systematic philosophy or belief system. They believed that any organized system implicitly perpetuated the hierarchical power structures of industrial capitalism.

Post-structuralism was taken to an extreme by some and evolved into a kind of radical skepticism. According to Derrida, there was no fundamental basis that provided meaning to language; all words are defined by other words, which are defined by others still, and so on. While Derrida did not conclude that all language was therefore meaningless, many followers did. Further, Derrida and many others at this time held the belief that language is the means by which reality is understood. However, if language is meaningless, then reality cannot be understood, and nothing can be known.

## Formalism

Formalism is a literary criticism school that developed in Russian during the early nineteenth century. They believed that literature could be studied in an objective, scientific manner and that it could be reduced to a number of constant laws, similar to the laws of motion in physics. The Formalists were concerned primarily with the structure of literature, and not its content, and this is a result of the linguistic theories to which they ascribed. One claim of the Formalists that persisted long after their school

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became obsolete was that literature was characterized by the fact that it made ordinary things seem "unfamiliar"; in other words, it presented objects, characters, or situations which may be altogether normal in a strange way such that one would scrutinize a situation which would normally simply be passed over.

## Reception Theory

Reception theory was developed by Wolfgang Iser in the late twentieth century. According to reception theory, the literary work is produced by the reader and not by the author. Since words are inherently vague and language can only convey hints, the reader must "fill in the gaps" and interpret the cues given by the author into a concrete whole.

## Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a school of literary analysis that developed on the basis of Martin Heidegger's philosophy. According to hermeneutics, all individuals are products of their time, history, and language; accordingly, the author of a piece of literature, even unconsciously, is including the values and prejudices of his historical situation.

## Modernist Literature

Modernist literature is a type of writing which developed in the mid- to late-twentieth century, which is characterized by its rejection of conventional literary norms of structure, coherence, and meaning. Modernist texts often have no clear plot or direction and often play loosely with rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

# Themes

## Literature as a Replacement for Religion

Eagleton consistently argues against literary theories on the basis that they are trying substitute literature for religion. This criticism is first aimed at the English in the late nineteenth century. Recognizing that England's unity was in danger as a result of the weakened state of the Church of England, Matthew Arnold looked to literature as a substitute for the pacifying effect of religion. Later, F.R. Leavis and his follows present literature as a means of moral growth and enlightenment, in much the same way as religion traditionally would improve a person. For New American Criticism and phenomenological schools of criticism, the literary work became an object of contemplation, which would reveal reality to the reader much like the act of prayer as it was conventionally conceived. Even work as late as Northrop Frye's attempts to replace religion by using literature to provide a number of common myths that unite all of mankind, from which we can learn valuable moral and even political lessons is argued against.

## The Relationship Between Literature and Politics

That literature is inextricably tied to politics is the dominant theme of this book and is the entire focus of the conclusion. This claim rests largely upon Eagleton's understanding of language. Language is not understood to be a mere tool which humans use to convey their states of mind to one another. Rather, language is understood to, in a sense, produce people and conform them to the society in which they leave. Language is a product of one's society and, as such, is permeated by the customs, behaviors, values, and prejudices of that society; above all, language is infected with the political ideology of the ruling class. It is primarily through language that oppressive governments maintain control.

Literature is obviously composed of language and also holds a unique status in most societies. After the time of Arnold and Leavis, it is often elevated to a kind of holy or religious status from which all can learn, revered in a way similar to Sacred Scripture. This gives literature a kind of influence over society which is easily manipulated to reinforce social and economic power-structures.

The role of the literary critic, then, is to confront and expose the ideology buried beneath the language, not only of literature, but all forms of discourse. Moreover, the role of the artist is to subvert the language of one's society to further his or her political goals, whether they be to bring about a socialist revolution, emancipate women from oppression, or anything else.

## Capitalism and Oppression

Eagleton presents a very negative view of capitalism throughout the book and follows Marx (whom he cites repeatedly) in believing that capitalism and the institutions which generally go along with it are the chief causes of human suffering and misery. He sharply criticizes any literary theorist who accepts or tolerates capitalism and even goes after those literary theorists who condemn it but refuse to take any action to change it.

In chapter five, Eagleton gives a Freudian account of why capitalism is so destructive of human happiness. As Freud points out, all humans are torn between the conflict urges known as the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The pleasure principle drives man towards doing what is pleasant; the reality principle, recognizing that work must be done to survive, represses the pleasure principle and causes man to work. According to Eagleton, in capitalist systems, the pleasure principle is endlessly repressed in the working class for the satisfaction of the desires of the ruling class. Long-term repression of this nature inevitably leads to neurosis and psychic unhappiness.

# Style

## Perspective

Eagleton is a professor and academic who has spent years studying literary theory and its history and he is obviously very familiar with his subject matter. Eagleton is explicit from the book's opening that he is biased and opinionated and, further, that he will make no attempt to be objective. This is consistent with the general premise of his book; according to Eagleton, true objectivity is impossible and anything which claims to objective is dishonest. Eagleton's bias, then, is that the modern political and social structures are oppressive and need be to transformed or even abolished in favor of a socialist society. While his particular bias is not made explicit throughout the book, his constant critiques of capitalism heavily suggest it.

He is also very critical of certain types of literary theory that attempt to understand literature as something more than a social construct. As the conclusion makes obvious, Eagleton totally rejects the notion of "literature" as anything more than a construct created by the ruling powers of society. What is considered literature is always, he argues, simply what implicitly supports the power structures and those who control them. This opinion can be seen especially in his critiques of earlier literary theorists such as F.R. Leaves, T.S. Eliot, and the phenomenological literary analysts.

## Tone

Eagleton's tone throughout the book is decidedly biased and opinionated. This is intentional and explicit on his part, as he believes that true objectivity is impossible and that all writing is necessarily biased. He makes no attempt to hide his criticisms of literary theories with which he disagrees. Given his conclusion that literary theory does not exist, he tends to disagree, to some extent, with all of the literary theories he mentions.

That said, Eagleton does attempt to provide a fair, almost charitable interpretation of literary theories before he points out the flaws he finds in them. However, often his biases come out even in his exposition of the theory if it is a person or school he particularly disagrees with. For example, his account of T.S. Eliot's literary theory is shot through with subtle jabs and criticisms even before he gets to his "official" critique.

## Structure

The book begins with a brief preface that urges the reader to not be skeptical of literary theory and to approach the text with an open mind. He points out that most people who claim that literary theory is unnecessary usually have literary theories of their own, even if they are not aware of them, which they are unwilling to question. This is followed by an introduction that discusses the question of what literature is. After a number of

possible answers are defeated, Eagleton concludes that literature is a kind of social construct which has no definite, unchanging meaning from one period to the next.

The main part of the book is then divided into five chapters and a conclusion that roughly trace the history of literary theory starting with eighteenth-century England. In the first chapter, Eagleton uses the example of English literature to illustrate the fact that literature is tightly bound up with political ideology. The second chapter picks up where the first left off—at the beginning of the twentieth century—and discusses the development of Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology, Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and the development of reception theory. The third chapter introduces structuralism, a linguistically-derived literary theory that has profound implications for future theories. The fourth chapter discusses post-structuralism, the linguistic philosophy of Jacques Derrida, which developed in the seventies and shows how that philosophy developed up to present day. In the fifth chapter, Eagleton reaches back in time and discusses the psychological writings of Sigmund Freud and their relevance to linguistic and literary theory. In the conclusion, Eagleton re-emphasizes the political nature of literature, suggests the abolition of literary theory as a discipline, and calls for its replacement with a study of rhetoric, a science which does not confine itself to the socially-constructed category of literature.

# Quotes

"The idea that there is a single 'normal' language, a common currency shared equally by all members of society, is an illusion." p. 5

"If it will not do to see literature as an 'objective', descriptive category, neither will it do to say that literature is just what people whimsically choose to call literature. For there is nothing at all whimsical about such kinds of value-judgment: they have their roots in deeper structures of belief which are as apparently unshakeable as the Empire State building." p. 16

"In the face of such forces, the privilege accorded by the Romantics to the 'creative imagination' can be seen as considerably more than idle escapism. On the contrary, 'literature' now appears as one of the few enclaves in which the creative values expunged from the face of English society by industrial capitalism can be celebrated and affirmed." p. 19

"Deprived of any proper place within the social movements which might actually have transformed industrial capitalism into a just society, the writer was increasingly driven back to the solitariness of his own creative mind." p. 20

"The ideology of New Criticism began to crystallize: scientific rationalism was ravaging the 'aesthetic life' of the old South, human experience was being stripped of its sensuous particularity, and poetry was a possible solution." p. 46

"This idea of a meaningless solitary utterance untainted by the external world is a peculiarly fitting image of phenomenology as such." p. 61

"'True' history for Heidegger is an inward, 'authentic' or 'existential' history - a mastering of dread and nothingness, a resoluteness towards death, a 'gathering in' of my power - which operates in effect as a substitute for history in its more common and practical senses." p. 65

"Hermeneutics sees history as a living dialogue between past, present and future, and seeks patiently to remove obstacles to this endless mutual communication." p. 73

"The meaning of the text is not just an internal matter: it also inheres in the text's relation to wider systems of meaning, to other texts, codes and norms in literature and society as a whole." p. 103

"Structuralism may examine and appeal to existing practice; but what is its answer to those who say: 'Do something else'?" p. 126

"Deconstruction, that is to say, has grasped the point that the binary oppositions with which classical structuralism tends to work represent a way of seeing typical of ideologies." p. 133

"Structuralism is best seen as both symptom of and reaction to the social and linguistic crisis I have outlined. It flees from history to language - an ironic action, since as Barthes sees few moves could be more historically significant." p. 141

"For the symbolic order of which Lacan writes is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the father embodies." p. 188

"Rightly or wrongly, Freudian theory regards the fundamental motivation of all human behaviour as the avoidance of pain and the gaining of pleasure: it is a form of what is philosophically known as hedonism. The reason why the vast majority of people read poems, novels and plays is because they find them pleasurable." p. 191

"There is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: as with South African sport, it has been there from the beginning." p. 194

"If literary theory presses its own implications too far, then it has argued itself out of existence." p. 204

"The liberation of Shakespeare and Proust from such controls may well entail the death of literature, but it may also be their redemption." p. 217

# Topics for Discussion

What are the important differences between Formalism and Structuralism?

In what way does Post-Structuralism build upon Structuralism, and in what ways does it differ from Structuralism?

Derrida rejected the skeptical philosophy that many of the followers of Post-Structuralism adopted. Does this skepticism follow from the basic beliefs of Derrida and Post-Structuralism?

Eagleton criticizes many literary schools for political inaction. Why, according to his views, are literary schools obligated to engage in political activism?

If there is no such thing as literature, as Eagleton claims in the Conclusion, how is the discussion of literary theory useful?

Freud's psychoanalysis is incorporated into many literary theories and yet, as Eagleton points out, it is seriously flawed because its claims are for the most part untestable. Does this imply a defect in those literary theories that use it?

According to Saussure's linguistics, how does it follow from the fact that signifiers are arbitrary, that signifiers are only defined in virtue of not being other signifiers?

The majority of literary theories after Saussure follow his linguistic theory. Is this theory realistic? If not, does this cast serious doubts upon the literary theories that are based upon it?

Can "literature" be defined?

To what extent do Eagleton's claims about literary theory depend upon his socialist political beliefs? If one rejects his socialist beliefs, can they still accept his literary views? How would Eagleton himself answer this question?

Eagleton often criticizes a literary theory for trying to substitute itself for religion. Is this necessarily bad? If so, why?