Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction Study Guide

Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction by Jonathan Culler

Contents

Plot Summary

Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction by Professor Jonathan Culler, takes the approach in describing the subject of literary theory that it is more beneficial to discuss the overall impact of the discipline rather than enter the debate arena and address the questions and controversy that linger about it. An element of controversy exists about literary theory due to its uncertain intersection with literary criticism as well as an even more troublesome issue in that literary theory is accused by some of transforming the study of culture over the past twenty years. Further, it is blamed for sparking disrespect for tradition and what some consider "truth" or conventional wisdom and creating suspicion about the political and psychological elements of society rather than focusing solely on literature.

It is thought by some that literary criticism and literary theory are closely related, while true advocates of the theory see vast distinctions. Surpassing the bounds of critical examination, literary theory delves into esoteric areas of literary works that are complicated and that reach far beyond the parameters of a particular literary work.

Literary theory has revealed much about literature and culture over the years. The roots of today's "modern individual" can be traced squarely back to 18th century writers who described what the behavior of the ideal woman was. Later, these idealistic expectations of women were transferred to men as well. A French writer of the 18th century, Jacques Rousseau, is attributed with developing the concept of the individual self.

In addition to the more sweeping effects that literary theory has discovered and revealed, Culler lays out the technical aspects of the work in which the theorist engages. The analysis of the language used and the meanings it implies as well as overall interpretations are all part of the theorist's job. Thorough explanations are provided on the use and importance of rhetoric, poetics and poetry. The power of the narrative and performative language is also given special focus.

Culler emphasizes the important role of the reader in literary theory. The skills and experience that the reader brings to his/her role is an essential part of the overall competence of literary theory. While a reader does not have to agree with a plot, it is essential that the plot is understandable and engaging at some level in order to contribute to the worth of the work. When the reader is able to identify with a character or circumstances, s/he will want to see the story to its conclusion.

Culler speaks with great respect about literary theory being an endless process; however, he ends on the high note that the thought process that literary theory stimulates is boundless and infinite as well.

Chapter 1, What Is Theory?

Chapter 1, What Is Theory? Summary and Analysis

The term theory

The word "theory" signals "speculation"; however, theory is much more than a guessing game. Speculation about an issue will ultimately be proven wrong or right. In concept, "theory" will not necessarily yield a definitive answer. A theory does not state the obvious; rather, it involves a measure of complexity especially in relations of a systematic nature. A true theory is not easily proved or refuted.

Philosopher Richard Rorty advanced the notion that the works of Goethe and Emerson, among others in the 19th century, created a new genre of literature that was dubbed in a general sense "theory." While Goethe wrote of the sad tale of unrequited love in The Sorrows of Young Werther, the story contains the underlying theory that life devoid of passion is meaningless. Literary theory is comprised of works that have effects beyond their basic story. Literary theory does not represent a contained set of methods; instead, it is a genre inclusive of an unrelated group of writings about every subject imaginable. These works provide prospective on gender studies, film studies, social and intellectual history, anthropology—the list is infinite.

Theory can bring new life to old ideas or indeed even foment their demise. Theory is a critique of common-sense notions which are often in reality only unproven theories themselves that have endured for years and, left unchallenged, have come to be accepted as sage. Literary theory takes a whole new perspective on what was considered to be conventional wisdom.

French intellectual historian Michel Foucault advances the "repressive hypothesis" in The History of Sexuality. Foucault asserts that sexuality is something that in earlier periods was repressed by society [which would include the literature of the day] and something which modern writers have fought to liberate. The 19th century view of sex artificially grouped together all aspects of the subject and collectively called it "sex;" that is, the composite term "sex" referred at once to anatomical elements, biological functions, behavior and so forth.

The "sex" of a person came to identify him or her and was thought to be responsible for behavior, giving sex a new import and role—even the secret to one's true nature. One example, is the creation in the 19th century of the "homosexual" as an almost new species. In earlier times, "homosexual acts" were ascribed to an individual; in the 19th century, a person engaging in such acts was labeled a "homosexual."

Literature of the 19th century constructed "sex" from the mores and institutions of the day, while moderns view these works as attempts at sexual repression. Foucault

challenges the 19th century proposition that the true nature of an individual lay hidden in his all-encompassing "sex."

Thinking that becomes theory provides one with the ability to apply these skills to other subjects. Theorizing that sexuality and the power that allegedly may expose it is in actuality a complicit relationship rather than one of opposition. Said thinking then could lead one to question that if there is a relationship between sexuality and power, what purpose is there in concealing it? The resultant false premise, according to Foucault, is that in championing sexuality one can avoid tangling with power.

Although there is evidence that Foucault's repressive hypothesis is plausible, like any other theory, it is inherently speculative. However, his theory does expose how discursive, confused practices lead to fundamental societal mores and opinions, and literature is one venue in which such theories are constructed. Foucault's account has been useful to people studying both the novel and those working in gay and lesbian studies and gender studies in general.

Foucault is credited with attaching historical depth to such subjects as "sex," "punishment" and "madness." Foucault encourages readers to look anew at these and all subjects keeping in mind how erratic constructions, including those created in literature, may have falsely shaped things that are taken as gospel.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida takes an in-depth look at the Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was a French writer of the 18th century who is credited with helping to develop the notion of the individual self. Although Rousseau asserts that writing is an inessential supplement to speech that invites misunderstanding, his works treat writing as a clarification process that completes the spoken word. Instead of proving to be misleading, writing can convey what was actually meant by the errant speaker.

Derrida advances the logic of supplementarity, which he discovered in Rousseau's works: the thing (speech) being supplemented turns out to have the same imperfect characteristics as the supplement (writing). Just as Rousseau claims the potential for writing to be misinterpreted, the spoken word has that same vulnerability. Through a series of supplements [support structures] a law emerges—the original depends on the strength of its supplements; i.e, the original [the spoken word] is defined and is endlessly linked to its supplements [written interpretation].

The theories of Derrida and Foucault differ in that Derrida depicts literary works as offering explicit speculative arguments about writing and supplementation while at the same time guiding thought on these same topics in ways that leave them implicit. Foucault advances the hypothesis that society [including writers] creates the thing that they claim merits their awe and analysis.

Theory is 1) discourse with effects outside an original discipline; 2) analytical and speculative; 3) a critique of preconceived ideas; and, 4) reflexive—inquiry into the categories used to make sense of things, including literature.

Theory is endless and intimidating and something which can never be mastered. The nature of theory is to undo that which is already known; it's results are unpredictable. This short introduction outlines significant lines of thought and debate, especially those pertaining to the vast world of literature.

Chapter 2, What Is Literature and Does It Matter?

Chapter 2, What Is Literature and Does It Matter? Summary and Analysis

For studies of theory, it is immaterial if the subject text is literary or non-literary. Both literary and non-literary works can be studied in similar ways.

There exists a literariness of non-literary works. Qualities one could assume to be exclusive to literary works are nonetheless contained in non-literary discourses as well. For example, a historic account of World War I is not presented in a scientific manner; rather, it is told in the logical sequences of a story—a literary narrative. Theorists have supported the use in non-literary texts of rhetorical devices such as metaphors formerly considered to be just ornamental flourish in such works. However, in illustrating how such rhetorical tools can shape discourses in non-literary works demonstrates that literariness is certainly present in such works. Therefore, for students of theory, the distinction between the analysis of literary works versus the non-literary is non-existent.

To a literary theorist, the question, "What is literature?" only gives rise to more questions: What sort of object or activity is it? What does it do? What purpose does it serve? The question begs not an answer but rather an analysis. To address the fundamental question, however, literature comes in varied styles and covers varied subjects. Often a literary work of one kind closely resembles that of another; i.e. Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, a work of fiction, has characteristics of an autobiography. Robert Burns poem, "My love is like a red, red rose" is closer to a folk song than to the poetry found in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Modern literature is only two centuries old. Prior to 1800, literature simply meant "writings" or "book knowledge." True analysis is not done on those older works—many are sermons and letters, a true mishmash of the written word. Modern Western literature can be traced to the German Romantic theorists of the late 18th century. Some assert that literature is whatever a society deems it to be. Weeds are declared to be weeds because the gardener doesn't want to grow them. Literature is text that a society chooses to treat as literature.

Literature must contain words that have interest and words that have relationships to one another and significance in what they imply. Most important is how they fit in the story's context—that is, the relationship of the words to the story they are attempting to convey. The text must engage the literary scholar to dive deeper into the meaning of the word and how it relates to the entire presentation. In essence, literature is a set of assumptions and interpretations gleaned from the text.

What separates literature from other writing is that it has gone through a selection process and been published. This process signals to the reader that the work has worth—it is something that is readable. The reader, knowing that the work has passed through this process, feels a burden to understand the words and the account they convey.

Literature may be constructed in organized language; however, not all such works are literature, i.e., the phone book. Rather, literature is writing that receives special attention—more than a newspaper article for example. Theorists assert five points about the nature of literature:

Literature as the "foregrounding" of language—language that is organized to attract the reader's attention to the story;

Literature as the integration of language—a complex relationship between elements of the text;

Literature as fiction—a story's fictional relationship to the world and author's intent is open for interpretation;

Literature as an aesthetic object—a literary work is an aesthetic; it invites the reader to explore the relationship between content (words) and form (images);

Literature as intertextual or of self-reflexive construct—authors advance literature as a reflection of literature itself; works are built upon aspects of other works.

None of the qualities prove to be defining as they each contain an inter-mingling of the each other's features.

Throughout history there has been purpose to literature. English literature was politically charged with boasting about the greatness of the Crown to insure that the colonists would be appropriately indoctrinated. At home in Britain, literature was aimed at creating harmony among the classes, instilling national pride and holding society together by providing a replacement for religion which had faded in importance among the people.

The universality of fiction appealed to readers. Was the story of Hamlet about princes, Renaissance men or introspective young men? By not pigeonholing a story or character, the reader is allowed the satisfaction of affixing the reader's own identity to them. The opportunity to imagine the ideal character or locale is vastly appealing. Literature was thought to make "people better," to aspire for more: The low class worker in a novel can in the end be of better character than the aristocrat.

Literature provides the means to both elevate ideology and to destroy it. Literature can tell stories supporting society—a woman can only be happy if she finds true love and marries. Conversely, literature can portray a woman who breaks free from those ideas and finds her own brand of happiness.

Theorists come down on both sides of literature's role in human being's behavior. Some feel the solitary reader of literature as isolated, passive and disengaged. Others see literature as a dynamic if not dangerous force that sparks the flames that lead to rebellion and change. Fundamentally, literature is taking any subject, belief, or value and treating them in any way—mocking them or lauding them. It can turn something that makes complete sense into utter nonsense. Literature is both society's sounding board and voice.

Chapter 3, Literature and Cultural Studies

Chapter 3, Literature and Cultural Studies Summary and Analysis

The culture of a society drives the literature that is produced. Cultural studies encompass literary theory as a specific cultural element. At first blush, it is unclear whether literary theory gains new importance in cultural studies or is diminished by many other segments of culture.

Cultural studies have their roots in two sources. The first is French structuralism which organizes culture into a set of practices defined by its rules or conventions. The second source is Marxist literary theory which attempts to recover voices from the past, writing history from below. This theory intersected and melded with another Marxist product, European Marxist theory, which analyzes mass culture as opposed to popular culture.

Cultural studies as a whole have a duality. On the one hand, they seek to learn what is important in the lives of ordinary men. On the other, there is a genuine need to show how people are shaped by cultural forces. This theory of interpellation originated with French Marxist Louis Althusser. It is a process in which the impact of outside forces is measured on the individual. If one is repeatedly told by society, that he is "this," does he eventually become "this," and without those outside forces would he have developed differently? Cultural studies exist in the tension between these two approaches. Pop culture develops outside the mainstream culture, a grass roots phenomenon.

Since cultural studies rose from literary theory, they are not necessarily at odds. However, debate about their relationship can be grouped around two major topics: 1) literary canon—literature that is routinely studied in schools and universities; and, 2) the ideal ways in which to analyze cultural objects.

The concern is that culture may swallow up classical literature, leaving in its wake soap operas and TV. However, literary theory has gone a long way to save the classics. By applying modern theory to these works, they are studied and read more than ever. What has suffered are the minor writers of an era. While Shakespeare is widely read and interpreted, authors such as Marlowe and Ben Jonson are rarely read and are casualties of modernity. Thus far, the influx of cultural studies has expanded the literary canon, bringing in literature pertinent to the culture; i.e., women's issues, minority struggles, etc., and rediscovering heretofore neglected classics that are applicable to modern cultural elements.

The second concern in literary theory vs. cultural study is that if the latter becomes dominant, will it subsume literary theory? There are signs of fray—for one, "close

reading" of literature by cultural scholars is no longer demanded. Although there are danger signs, this concern has not yet been validated as a real threat to literature.

The goal of cultural studies is to make a difference; that is, not only to study culture but to provide fodder for the intervention of negative trends. Appreciative interpretation has been associated with literary study, while a more clinical approach has been taken in cultural studies.

Chapter 4, Language, Meaning and Interpretation

Chapter 4, Language, Meaning and Interpretation Summary and Analysis

Questions about the nature and role of language in literature and how to analyze it continue to linger. The effect that language sparks the reader's own imagination and creativity is part of its meaning. How do the words stir the reader? How does the reader relate his own life/world to the words? What are the obscure meanings of the words—the subliminal message? Language is a system of differences according to Ferdinand de Saussure, renowned Swiss linguist. The elements of language are distinguished by their contrast to its other elements. A "chair" is not a "dog." The reader can visualize what a chair is. Words are based on the conventions and practices of a culture.

Most theorists argue that language provides a way to express one's thoughts. Some linguists feel that language determines what one can think, a theory advanced in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In Western cultures, the former is the consensus winner. Word conventions vary from one country/language to another. In the US, the gender of a newborn baby is important so the baby can immediately be referred to by the right sex, "he" or "she." In other cultures, the sex of a newborn is not of paramount importance since there is a word that can be used that does not assign gender. Language is the ultimate messenger of a thought or an idea as well as the vehicle to question anything one may encounter.

To understand a language as a functioning system, a linguist must understand the underlying conventions that play into its meaning and form. Going a step further, premiere linguist Noam Chomsky asserts that linguists raise the level of language so that speakers of language are equipped to speak (or read) and understand sentences they have never before encountered.

There are two different approaches taken by literary theorists to understand the meaning of text. In the first, called poetics, the theorist begins with a preconceived meaning to a work (irony, for example) and then goes about providing evidence of the use of that construct. In hermeneutics, the theorist approaches a work in an unbiased fashion and then discovers what meaning it has. Modern interpretation in the main follows the latter process.

Taking readers into consideration and the way they interpret text has led to "reader-response criticism," which argues that the meaning of the text is dependent upon the knowledge and experience the reader brings to it. What the reader can convey about a work depends on what theorists have labeled his "horizon of expectations." The reader will have different expectations reading Shakespeare than when he reads a modern novel. Expectations may differ if a woman is reading a work as opposed to a man. A

vast array of elements will affect the reader's interpretation of a work. Thus far in the world, most works of literature and film are created from a male point of view.

Interpretations can vary even with one person. A reader's private interpretation is different from one s/he shares with friends. That same reader is exposed to a more formal interpretation if s/he studies it in a classroom. What the story is "about" elicits more than a one-dimensional answer. Shakespeare's Hamlet is about a Danish Prince on one level; however, on another plane, Hamlet is about the collapse of Elizabethan England. This example illustrates that underlying themes emerge in literature, the recognition of which is one of the goals of the theorist.

Determining the meaning of words is not an easy proposition as it is complex and elusive. There are four elements to consider: 1) the meaning of the words; 2) the meaning intended by the words; 3) the context in which the words exist; and, 4) how the words are interpreted. Interpretation can be expanded to include those that yield something important to be said or those that are "symptomatic" of some esoteric theme beyond the fundamental story.

Chapter 5, Rhetoric, Poetics, and Poetry

Chapter 5, Rhetoric, Poetics, and Poetry Summary and Analysis

Poetics, the attempt to account for literary effects, is closely related to rhetoric, which is the study of the techniques of language that can be used to create effective writing. Aristotle made a sharper distinction between the two, defining "poetics" as an imitative art and "rhetoric" as the art of persuasion. The Renaissance softened the distinctions by asserting "rhetoric" as the art of eloquence and "poetics" as a superior form of rhetoric. In modern times, rhetoric has become the study of the structuring powers of discourse.

Like rhetoric, poetry, through its imagery, has persuasive powers. Further, it can serve as a method for venting strong emotion. A rhetorical figure uses an ordinary word in a different more powerful way. "My love is like a red, red rose" does not mean the object of affection is a flower; rather the person is rare and precious, fragile and beautiful. Derrida asserts that the interpretation of a metaphor sometimes relies on another metaphor. Others claim that literal language is figurative in nature. One forgets the figurative descriptions in such expressions as "grasping a hard problem." The metaphor is a widely used, effective figure that has become basic to the coupling of imagination and language. It is powerful and makes the reader stop and think: Wordsworth's line "the child is father to the man" is a perfect example.

Several tropes that are the most commonly used in language are: The trope metonymy, which is considered by some to be basic and fundamental to language: "The Crown" means the Queen; "Capital Hill" means the Congress. Synecdoche, a substitution of part for the whole ("wheels" means an auto) or whole for a part (the "law" meaning a police officer). Irony, when events unfold opposite of what seemed certain are

Beyond words and meaning, the overarching element in a work is its genre. The reader knows generally what to expect if he is reading a suspense story, a romance or a historic novel.

The Greeks divided works into three main classes: Poetic or lyric where the narrator speaks in first person; narrative where the narrator speaks but characters do as well; and, drama where the characters do all the talking. Contemporary theorists look upon epic poetry as artistry that has little impact on culture.

In poetry, it is crucial to make the distinction between the voice that speaks from the work and that of its author—the words emanate from a figurative voice. Lyric poetry has been described as a somewhat voyeuristic act by the reader—listening in on the very private thoughts of someone. Some poetry has no relevance to the real world and can only be appreciated for its artistry and imagery: "Tiger, tiger burning bright | In the forests of the night" has no connection to anything in the real world. There is no meaningful interpretation for this hyperbole.

Extravagant lyric—i.e., rhetorical figures such as apostrophe, personification and prosopopoeia—are used in poetry that aspires to the sublime. That is, lyric exceeds human comprehension, evokes passion and gives the reader a glimpse at other-worldliness. Lyric presents a story through verbal patterning, i.e, rhythmic words. For example, the rhythmic beginning of a child's nursery rhyme: "Pease porridge, hot | Pease porridge cold. . . ." The reader or child being read to does not need to, or may not want to, know what "pease porridge" is but finds the rhythm pleasing. Poems should be read in the whole—not as a fragment of something else that needs further interpretation.

Chapter 6, Narrative

Chapter 6, Narrative Summary and Analysis

During the 20th century, study of the novel dominates literary education. It is also the most popular form of literature among readers. The appeal of the narrative is attributed to the gratification of hearing and telling stories. Aristotle says that plot is the most important part of a story and to be satisfying, a story must contain a premise, a conflict and a resolution. The conclusion, however, ideally must have a tie-in to the beginning. The structure that connects the parts of a story is its plot. The discourse of the story is how the plot is presented, i.e., from which character's point of view. The plot is something the reader garners from the text—it is not something that is provided in a sentence or paragraph at the beginning of the narrative. Reader satisfaction stems from the ability to discover the plot. "Aha, that's what's going on here."

The narration of a story can be presented in various ways. First-person narration includes the narrator as a character and tells the account from and "I" standpoint. These characters may be observers or protagonists. The narrator is not a character in third-person narration. The narrative establishes who speaks and when. An event could be described in the present or past. The voice of the narrative can slip into a childish one when exploring the thoughts of a young character. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes the novel as polyphonic or multi-voiced: different voices making way for conflict then resolution. Narration is most trusted when delivered with an unbiased voice.

The reader understands who is speaking but but must also learn from whose vision the story is being told. In the Henry James novel, What Maisie Knew, the narration is told by an adult but through the eyes of a child. Who the story is "seen" by allows the author to explore and include past experiences of the character and his or her reaction to those experiences. The focalization of a story can be spread over a long period of time or sped up with a quick summary of events that took place over a long period of time.

The narrator can provide only limited knowledge of what is transpiring, which can work to the story's advantage in its mystique. On the other hand, if "omniscient narration" is employed, the narrator is god-like and knows every movement and thought of the characters. The god-like narrator, however, can select to withhold information from the reader to build suspense and engage the reader's imagination. The third person limited point of view offers only what the narrator believes to have occurred. Unreliable narration most often occurs from the limited point of view.

Stories give pleasure to their readers especially when there is surprise or a new twist to an old plot. There is a basic human need to know and understand. Thus, once the reader is engaged in a story, there is the innate drive to learn how it concludes. Through its characters, the novel allows its readers to gain understanding of other people and

their situation—to take a step outside their box. Novels teach readers that true love is possible and that heartache is just around the corner.

Novels also serve to expose social injustice, implicitly signaling to their readers that some situations are intolerable. Theorists must contend with a basic question about narratives: Is the narrative to be trusted as a source of knowledge or does it distort as much as it informs? This question does not have a one-size-fits all answer. What narrative does is open the mind to possibilities. The "knowledge" it provides must be tested and scrutinized.

Chapter 7, Performative Language

Chapter 7, Performative Language Summary and Analysis

The concept of performative utterance was developed by British philosopher J. L. Austin in the 1950s. He delineated the distinction between constative and performance utterances. An example of a constative performance would be: "I promised to attend your party." It describes a state of affairs and can be proven true or false: Did the person attend? Said as a performance utterance, the same statement would go something like this: "I promise to come to your party." It is declarative and connotes action and cannot be proven true or false—the performance utterance is an act in and of itself. Recognizing performative utterances provides theorists with a measure of how much language performs action as opposed to just writing about them. Ironically, constative utterances can also perform actions.

Performative language helps characterize discourse. Literary performatives create a state of affairs and present ideas and concepts. Some theorists feel that the whole idea of what "being in love" is, is a total creation of literature. Literary performatives place literature in the lofty position of being able to transform the world. A literary performative is considered felicitous not only if it fits in satisfactorily with the rest of the discourse but also if it fits in with conventions of the literary genre. To be truly felicitous, however, it first must be literature that has been published.

Derrida argued in opposing Austin's theory that performative language can be non-serious. To be truly performative, language must be codified or repeatable. When a groom says "I do," everyone knows what the phrase connotes. If he said "Okay," that statement would not provide the correct legacy for the circumstance. Therefore, language not only transmits information, it performs acts by its repetition.

If every utterance is both constative and performative, what an utterance says vs. what it does is not necessarily harmonious. "Three blind mice" sets the premise; while "See how they run" connotes action—the two utterances have no intra-dependence.

American philosopher Judith Butler was a pioneer in the performative theory of gender and sexuality in feminist and gay and lesbian studies. The performative language that accompanies the birth of a girl is, "It's a girl." This "girl" must live up to the legacy that accompanies the word. When a gay man is called "queer," the name-caller is acting as the authority on the subject and brings with him all the invectives the word has meant over the years. The connection of performative language to its past meanings makes the potential for controversy a constant.

The concept of the performative must be thought of in several ways: 1) How does it serve to shape the role of language?; 2) How is the relation between society and

individual acts discerned?; 3) How is the distinction made between what a language says and what it does?; and, 4) How should the performative be viewed post-event?

Chapter 8, Identity, Identification, and the Subject

Chapter 8, Identity, Identification, and the Subject Summary and Analysis

Literary theorists debate about the identify and function of self. Who is the "I" in "I am?" Is the self, or subject, something natural or manufactured by societal demands? Further, there is the question as to whether the subject should be viewed as an individual or in terms of society. The natural individual is a product of the subject's inner core. In the second proposition, the subject is a manufactured product which is determined by one's origins and social attributes. There is consensus that all subjects are subjected to social, sexual and linguistic influences.

Literary works provide models of identity. There is identity by birthright: the King who is raised by shepherds is still a king. Another model presents one's identity as changing due to circumstances: He was born a King but has learned to become a shepherd. Some characters want to "find" themselves; then and only then are their true natures revealed. Literature tends to portray the true nature of a character coming to fore only through his trials and tribulations. Are characters in novels and how they face internal and external challenges exemplary? Theorists have concern that by literature, in many cases, taking the role of the individual over that of a group, it neglects addressing a larger societal issue.

Character identity is a major theme in literature. Readers are engaged by characters and their struggles—there is a connection with the identity of the individual. Some argue that popular characterizations in novels have had ill effects on individuals (revolt, risk-taking); while other critics see readers emerge enriched through their vicarious experience and identification with the characters.

American critic Nancy Armstrong asserts that the "modern individual" is a product of 18th-century novels which dwell on the proper behavior of women. The identity of this ideal woman is rooted in her feelings and personal qualities rather than her class. Later, this identification process was assigned to men. This theory that champion feelings and virtue, says Armstrong, is supported by novels, television and film.

On a psychoanalytical level, one's identity can be traced to one's first memory of a parent who one then emulates—or that first reflection in a mirror that visually tells one who s/he is (French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's "the mirror stage"theory). On the subject of group identity, there is the risk that being defined by one's group diminishes the individual. Must all black, all women, all gays have the same traits? The individual is in danger of being lost if he is seen through the characteristics that have been ascribed to the group. If discourse describes what it is to be a man, it may deny men human qualities that literature and other media have erroneously characterized as feminine.

Debate continues on whether the "I" acts freely or is encumbered in pre-determined choices. Looking deeply and focusing upon how identities are constructed and the role that literature and other influences play in their construction may be more beneficial than superficial debate.

Theory does not offer a set of tested solutions; rather, it stimulates thought. It demands a commitment to read and to challenge conventional wisdom and pre-determined assumptions. Literary theory is endless—but just as infinite is the on-going process of the thinking it engenders.

Characters

Jacques Derrida

Professor Culler relies heavily on the work of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida's and his analysis of Confessions by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is attributed with helping develop the concept of the individual self. Rousseau contends that language was intended to be spoken and that writing is only a supplement to the spoken word.

Derrida, however, proposes that perhaps the "supplement" [writing] actually completes the imperfect spoken word. Derrida concludes that the thing supplemented [speech] is indeed a supplementation itself since it has the same qualities and weaknesses found in the supplement [writing]. Derrida eventually develops this theory into a law wherein he advances the concept that there is an infinite linked series of supplements that in fact produce an improved version of that which they supplement. Derrida's analytical interpretations illustrate the theoretical make-up of literary work and offer explicit and clear arguments on writing and its supplementation.

Professor Culler referenced Derrida again during his discussion on the use of rhetorical figures. In Derrida's "White Mythology," he contends that a metaphor is sometimes used to describe another metaphor. Culler once again calls on Derrida who, in opposing J. L. Austin's theory about non-serious performatives, contends that those "non-serious" performatives play an important role in language. Austin sets aside as aberrant utterances of what Derrida terms "iterability," that is a word or phrase that has legacy and is worthy of repetition. For example, when the groom at a wedding says, "I do," everyone understands the action of his words.

Michel Foucault

French intellectual historian Michel Foucault, author of The History of Sexuality is referenced as one of the most celebrated literary theorists. In this tome, Foucault presents what he calls "the repressive hypothesis." This theory argues that in earlier periods, especially in the 19th century, writers and other members of the elite society were prone to repress sexuality. In subsequent years, modern writers have tried to counter this repressive influence by creating writing that strives to liberate human sexuality.

The 19th century view of sex artificially grouped together all elements of human sexuality and collectively called it "sex;" that is, the single term "sex" referred at once to sexual organs, biological functions, practices, etc. Writers and others of the period advanced the misconception that one's sex held the secret of one's true nature. Prior to the 19th century, men who committed homosexual acts were called "men who committed homosexual acts." After the aforementioned period of sexual repression,

men who committed homosexual acts were called "homosexuals" and were thus identified by their sexual behavior. In essence, a new species was created.

Foucault's theory is that "sex" was created by the discourses that were connected to elite social practices and institutions existing in the 19th century such as the clergy, doctors and writers among others.

Richard Rorty

Philosopher Richard Rorty advanced the theory that a new, mixed genre of literature was developed in the 19th century with writers such as Goethe and Emerson.

Aristotle

Aristotle's views of literature are referenced several times. He asserted that rhetoric was the art of persuasion while poetics was the art of imitation. Aristotle portrayed stories as giving pleasure through the imitation and rhythm of life.

Nancy Armstrong

Nancy Armstrong, American critic, asserts that 18th century writers through their characters helped to mold the "modern individual."

Louis Althusser

Louis Althusser, French Marxist theorist, developed the concept of interpellation—the measure of outside influences upon an individual.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure, was a Swiss linguist of the early 20th century whose work has been important to contemporary theory.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a French writer of the 18th century who is credited with helping to develop the notion of the individual self. His works were studied extensively by philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Jacques Lacan

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan advanced the theory of "the mirror stage," which asserts that a human identification begins the moment an infant sees him/herself in a mirror..

J. L. Austin

J. L. Austin, British philosopher, developed the concept of performative utterances (implied actions) within the spoken word and in literature.

Objects/Places

History of Sexuality

The History of Sexuality by French historian Michel Foucault is referenced for its "repression hypothesis," which advanced the argument that sexuality is something that in earlier periods was repressed by society including writers.

Confessions

French philosopher Jacques Derrida's analysis of Confessions by Jean Jacques Rousseau is referenced in Literary Theory. Rousseau, a writer of the 18th century, is credited with advancing the modern notion of the individual self.

Marxist Literary Theory

Marxist Literary Theory, popular in Britain, attempted to write history from voices from the past. During the history of literary theory, it melded with the European Marxist theory, which analyzes mass culture as opposed to popular culture.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies are important to literary theory to measure the impact that literature has on culture and vice versa.

The Theory of Interpellation

The theory of interpellation was originated by French Marxist Louis Althusser. It is a process in which the impact of outside forces is measured on the individual.

Tropes

Tropes, or rhetorical figures, are ordinary words used in different, more powerful ways. The four most common used tropes are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and, irony.

Narrative

The narrative, the account of story, can be presented from various points of view. Choosing from what point of view the narrative is told— first person, third person or omniscient, for example—is important in how the story unfolds.

Performative Language

A performative utterance is an expression that performs an action. "I swear" performs the act of swearing. Literary performatives create a state of affairs and present ideas and concepts. Performative language helps characterize discourse.

Poetics and Hermeneutics

In poetics, the theorist starts with text with predetermined meanings, then seeks to understand their value but stays within the original interpretation. In Hermeneutics—the theorist looks at text with a fresh view and tries to discover a better interpretation.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was named after two linguists who asserted that the language spoken by a culture dictates what the people of that culture can think.

Themes

The Basics of Theory

For purposes of this book, theory refers to a genre of literature in which an underlying theme or message is advanced in an account or story about a subject that, on the surface, is unrelated. Theory is subtextual, existing below the surface of a piece of literature, and therefore it must be discovered by the reader; it is complex, and it is open to interpretation. Literary theory also takes into account the cultural impact on literature and vice versa. Culler's introduction to literary theory emphasizes that non-literary works (non-fiction) can be studied for their theoretical content as well as conventional literary works. For example, Culler cites the example of an account of World War I. The work, while historical and based upon real events, is not presented in a scientific manner; rather, it is presented in the style of a story and therefore contains the same logic and elements of a literary work and therefore can be approached by a theorist in the same manner as a work of fiction.

Author Johnathan Culler compares the theories that drive literary criticism. Some are at odds with one another, while others contain salient points of agreement. Culler takes great pains in explaining the importance of understanding what basic theory is as well as how it applies specifically to the study of literature. Theoretical studies are ambiguous and complicated and yield results that cannot easily be

refuted or confirmed. Culler also stresses that theory is an interdisciplinary phenomenon; once an individual gains skills in one area of theoretical study, s/he can then apply those abilities in other areas, including literature. Therefore theory, while contained in literature, is not confined to literature.

Deconstructing Text

To be able to adequately conduct his analysis, a literary theorist must strip the narrative of a work down to its smallest components; that is, words and their implicit and explicit meanings, their connotations and denotations, and their interrelatedness to other words in context. Deconstruction is an essential aspect of literary theory insofar that theory is implicit rather than explicit; it must be searched for and discovered rather than overtly presented. By participating in this process of textual deconstruction, the theorist can understand what part certain elements play in the overall construction of the work. Culler stresses that this process of comprehension is a subjective one. As well, meaning is a subjective phenomenon with textual elements representing different things to different people. Therefore it is essential that each element of a text be analyzed in the quest for meaning.

To a literary theorist, the question, "What is literature?" begs not an answer but rather a litany of more questions followed by an in-depth analysis, which results in a theory that

cannot necessarily be confirmed or refuted. To aid in this analysis, the theorist must be able to recognize and understand the "building blocks" which are shared by a great many books: genre, plot, rhetoric, such narrative devices as suspense, irony, foreshadowing, etc.. The understanding of these elements is key to the competence of an analysis.

In his analysis of a work, a literary theorist must consider that words are used to attract the reader to a story, the complexity of the language, the potential for multiple interpretation, the imagery of the words, and prior works on which it may, at least in part, be based upon. None of the qualities is definitive or singular, as they rely on the context of other elements. Interdependence of elements is then also studied.

The Role of the Reader in Literary Theory

The concept of literary competence is impossible without including the reader's role. What knowledge and skills does the reader bring to the reader's literary experience? What biases, overt and subliminal, accompany the reader? The role of the reader in literary theory resulted in what is officially called, "reader-response criticism," which theorizes that the meaning of a work is dependent upon the experiences of the reader. Readers will handle complexities and look for implicit meaning in a narrative at the level of their abilities. Interpretation of a literary work is accompanied by a story of reading it.

The retelling and understanding of a literary work depends on what theorists have dubbed the reader's"horizon of expectations." A reader will approach a Shakespearean work with a different mind-set than the reader would have in reading a work by one of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Many factors can affect or skew a reader's interpretation, including, but not limited to, the reader's sex and race. Since the majority of literature, TV and film is created from the male point of view, it is obvious that the level of understanding and affection or disaffection for a work would naturally differ between a man and woman.

Narrative competence depends on the reader's ability to identify the plot. A story that contains an unclear plot line will lose a good number of readers—the story will not be satisfying and will be difficult to retell. There is an innate desire to be told and to tell stories. It does not matter if the reader disagrees with the plot, but it is essential that the reader can identify the plot. Strong characterizations are important to the narrative in that the reader will identify with the character and/or with his trials and tribulations.

Style

Perspective

Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction by Jonathan Culler is written in first person narrative with Professor Culler as the narrator. Jonathan Culler is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University. Professor Culler has published many works including Barthes and Saussure in Fontana Modern Masters, On Deconstruction and The Pursuit of Signs. Professor Culler certainly has the credentials that qualifies him to provide the expertise and technical knowledge that he so obviously possesses.

On this very complex subject, Culler does not rely on his own knowledge alone. Rather, he makes multiple references to sources and resources that add historic knowledge and lend credibility to many of the theories and process that are advanced in Culler's narrative. For instance, he reaches back to ancient times for Aristotle's view on the necessity for each story to have a premise, conflict and resolution—a general format that is followed to this day. Aristotle extols the importance of a good plot and recognizes the human drive to hear and tell stories.

Other prestigious and respected sources referenced by Professor Culler include many literary experts and philosophical scholars. Some included are: Contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida; French intellectual historian Michel Foucault; Philosopher Richard Rorty; American literary critic Nancy Armstrong; French Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser; Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure; French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan; and, British philosopher J. L. Austin.

Tone

Jonathan Culler is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University. Naturally, the tone of the book—the subject of which is his area of expertise—is didactic. The tone of the book is, not surprisingly, scholarly and technical. There is much information contained in one paragraph and even one sentence. The tome is dense with information and therefore requires careful and deep reading for clarity and understanding.

The tenor of the book is not boastful and arrogant, but the dedication and respect that Professor Culler has for the weighty and controversial subject is evident throughout.

Culler takes the reader through the complicated history and philosophical background that is the legacy of literature and literary theory and their impact on the individual and on society. From the 18th century writers who some attribute with the creation of "the modern individual" and even "romantic love" itself, to the 19th century writers such as Goethe and Emerson who created the genre that has come to be known as literary theory.

Culler gently approaches the controversial aspect of literary theory by explaining how culture and literature sometimes wind up at odds with each other. Although he presents himself as an unbiased theoretician, Culler's championing of the power and importance of literature shines through.

Culler, with pride, ends his work with the concept that along with literary theory being infinite, the thought process that it sparks is boundless and just as endless.

Structure

Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction by Jonathan Culler, is divided into eight chapters which cover the various aspects of literary theory. The book begins with the basic definition of "theory," then applies those theoretic elements to the literary application. In the subsequent chapter, "Literature and Cultural Studies," Culler explains how literature and culture co-exist, sometimes in harmony but at other times clashing and looming as threats to one another. Culler contrasts literary theory with cultural studies that have become part of the scene since the 1960's. He explores the debate on whether culture has a greater impact on literature or if the reverse is true.

Culler places much focus on the meaning and interpretation of a literary work and many of the processes that a theorist must carefully undertake in her/his mission. As the book progresses, Culler delves into the linguistic elements of a narrative in a chapter named "Rhetoric, Poetics and Poetry." Great emphasis is placed on the power of language which Culler covers in the chapters covering the "Narrative" and "Performative Language."

Culler emphasizes the importance of the reader's role in understanding a work and its plot and the importance of a reader's empathy and identification with a character in the final chapter entitled, "Identity, Identification, and the Subject."

The narrative is followed by an appendix containing information about theoretical schools and movements; Culler's references; suggestions for further reading; and, an index.

Quotes

"A theory must be more than a hypothesis: it can't be obvious; it involves complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved." (3)

". . .theory is intimidating. One of the most dismaying features of theory today is that it is endless. It is not something that you could ever master, not a particular group of texts you could learn so as to 'know theory.'" (15)

"Literature is language that 'foregrounds' language itself: make it strange, thrusts it at you—'Look I'm language!'—so you can't forget that you are dealing with language shaped in odd ways." (23)

"Literature has been seen as a special kind of writing which, it was argued, could civilize not just the lower class but also the aristocrats and the middle class." (37)

"Literature is a paradoxical institution because to create literature is to write according to existing formulas—to produce something that looks like a sonnet or that follows the conventions of a novel—but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them. Literature is an institution that lives by exposing and criticizing its own limits, by testing what will happen if one writes differently." (40)

"Debates about the relation between literature and cultural studies are replete with complaints about elitism and charges that studying popular culture will bring the death of literature." (53)

"The extravagance of poetry includes its aspiration to what theorists since classical times have called the 'sublime': a relation to what exceeds human capabilities of understanding, provokes awe or passionate intensity, gives the speaker a sense of something beyond the human." (76)

"There is a basic human drive to hear and tell stories." (83)

"Aristotle says that plot is the most basic feature of narrative, that good stories must have a beginning, middle and end, and that they give pleasure because of the rhythm of their ordering." (84)

"The narrative patterning that produces a twist, as when the biter is bitten or the tables are turned, gives pleasure in itself, and many narratives have essentially this function: to amuse listeners by giving a new twist to familiar situations." (91)

"Literature is said to corrupt through mechanisms of identification. The champions of literary education have hoped, on the contrary, that literature would make us better people through vicarious experience and the mechanisms of identification. (113)

"Theory, then, offers not a set of solutions but the prospect of further thought. It calls for commitment of the work of reading, of challenging presuppositions, of questioning the assumptions on which you proceed. (120)

Topics for Discussion

What are the elements of a theory?

In what ways did writers of the 19th century impact both literature and culture? How did 18th century writers help create the modern person?

How can non-literary (non-fiction) works be considered appropriate subjects for analysis by literary theorists?

What is the distinction between constative and performance utterances? What considerations do literary theorists take into account in the analysis of performative language?

What danger exists when a subject or character is viewed in the context of a group?

What impact does literature have on culture? Describe the paradoxical nature of literature.

What are the different ways in which a novel can be narrated? What are the advantages/disadvantages of these approaches?