

AN OVERVIEW

A piece of literature can be read from a number of critical positions, which means you notice different things in the text and draw different conclusions. Even if you don't subscribe to a particular theory, you always have a vantage point from which you look at the text. Here are the names of the best known theories and a brief explanation of each.

You do not need to know the names of the theories for the exam, but you will need to know how to approach the text from that theory's view-point and knowing the names makes it easier to know what you're doing.

THE GREAT TRADITION – F. R. Leavis [1895–1978]

- There is a **link between all great writers**, because each learns from the writers that came before. By each modifying – or building on – what came before, literature progresses. This places a moral obligation on the writer to contribute something worthy of the tradition. The reader needs to be aware of the tradition in order to evaluate and understand the work.

READER RESPONSE – I. A. Richards [1893–1979]

- The individual reader's response is the important thing. What the writer might have intended is not important, what the reader finds is. This is in direct opposition to Leavis. The reader's way in to the text is through the **connection made between words and our perception of their meaning**. This is the theory we usually use at school.

RUSSIAN FORMALISTS [1910–1929]

- The focus here is on **literary devices** used by the author, the 'form' or structure rather than the meaning being of interest. How is literary language different from other ways of communicating. Objective analysis – what 'is', replaced subjective analysis – what it 'is about'. The reader looks at how a 'new reality' is created in the work of literature, what is 'foregrounded' as more important and how that is done.

SAUSSURE

- Because there is no **absolute association between a word and the object or idea it stands for**, language constructs our world and so each language – with its specific vocabulary, sentence structure and logic – creates a different concept of reality. For example, in Icelandic there are many words for 'snow' each representing a different type of snow, because it features more in Iceland than in England, though 'snow' is scientifically the same material in both. Structuralism developed from his theory.

GENRE THEORY

- Literature is classified into genre categories –e.g. thriller – then **judged against the conventions of that genre**. This theory is used particularly in media studies, but also by publishers and reviewers.

STRUCTURALISM

- The focus is on **analysing without evaluating**, showing what and how, but not judging how effective it is.
ROLAND BARTHES – **literature is a system of codes rooted in culture** that invites us to explore what ‘reality’ is – some texts remind us that a text is an artificial ‘reality’, while others strive to emulate [copy] reality : what we find in the text depends on our culture, because it pre-disposes us to notice and understand certain things.
PIERRE MACHEREY – a writer re-assembles pre-existing ideologies, conventions and codes according to ideologies s/he might not even be aware of. He says a **text speaks in its silences too** – what it doesn’t focus on is as telling as what it chooses to focus on.
ROMAN JAKOBSON – the **patterns in a text and the inter-relatedness of the language** are what you focus on – how you say it rather than what you say. He combined formalist and structuralist ideas, proposing a linguistic model in which there were six functions of writing, the most important being the ‘Poetic [literary] Function.

POST-STRUCTURALISM / DECONSTRUCTIONISTS – Jacques Derrida

- Because every text is ‘read’ differently as readers find their own meaning, **no text can be said to have ‘meaning’**: this invalidates textual interpretation. Words do not create meaning, they merely ‘play linguistic games’ [follow and break rules].

PSYCHOANALYSIS – Lacan

- Because a child learns through language, everything it learns is an interpretation of reality, thus **language denies us direct access to reality**, instead creating our reality for us. He used Freudian terms to describe literature. Psychological states , like the emotional conflict between characters, and repression is the focus of interest in a text.

FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

- Because the literary tradition was created overwhelmingly by men, this theory focuses on **exposing ‘patriarchal dominance’ and building up an alternative ‘feminine’ tradition**, which explores women’s experiences and how they interpret and use the literary and linguistic traditions differently to men.

MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM

- A **text is related to the social context of its author and the historical contexts in which it was written and read**. The focus is on what a text reveals about attitudes to social class. Later this was extended to race and gender, the aim being to promote an egalitarian [equal] society.

POST-COLONIAL LITERARY CRITICISM

- Here the focus is on **the struggle against injustice and oppression**, chiefly between black and white. Often this is literature in English, but outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition, with writers from the former colonies relating their experiences.