

**The Saylor Foundation's  
An Introduction to Literary Theory**



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## An Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory

Before we begin our examination and study of literary theory, it is important that we define exactly what literary theory is and is not, identify some of the main characteristics of such, as well as identify some of the key differences between traditional “literary criticism” and “literary theory.”

While literary criticism since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has often made use of different “theories” drawn from the social and natural sciences, philosophy, and other scholarly fields, strictly defined “schools” of literary theory began to appear throughout European and North American intellectual circles, colleges, and universities in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of literary theory during this time—and its continued popularity in European and American universities’ literature and humanities departments—is owed to a number of social and cultural factors. In particular, these factors include the development of post-structural philosophy in American and European colleges and universities; the popularity of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and other social and cultural theories throughout the intellectual world; and the multi- and cross-disciplinary academic ideology that began to pervade colleges and universities during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Strictly defined, “literary criticism” refers to the act of interpreting and studying literature. A literary critic is not someone who merely evaluates the worth or quality of a piece of literature but, rather, is someone who argues on behalf of an interpretation or understanding of the particular meaning(s) of literary texts. The task of a literary critic is to explain and attempt to reach a critical understanding of what literary texts mean in terms of their aesthetic, as well as social, political, and cultural statements and suggestions. A literary critic does more than simply discuss or evaluate the importance of a literary text; rather, a literary critic seeks to reach a logical and reasonable understanding of not only what a text’s author intends for it to mean but, also, what different cultures and ideologies render it capable of meaning.

“Literary theory,” however, refers to a particular form of literary criticism in which particular academic, scientific, or philosophical approaches are followed in a systematic fashion while analyzing literary texts. For example, a psychoanalytic theorist might examine and interpret a literary text strictly through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis and psychology and, in turn, offer an interpretation or reading of a text that focuses entirely on the psychological dimensions of it. Traditional literary criticism tends not to focus on a particular aspect of (or approach to) a literary text in quite the same manner that literary theory usually does. Literary theory proposes particular, systematic approaches to literary texts that impose a particular line of intellectual reasoning to it. For example, a psychoanalytic literary theorist might take the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung and seek to reach a critical understanding of a novel such as Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. A literary theorist applying, perhaps, Sigmund Freud’s notions of trauma to Hemingway’s novel might explore the protagonist’s psychology, using Freud’s theoretical “tools,” and argue that the protagonist suffers from what Freud termed “shell shock” and that the novel, then, can reasonably be argued to be a commentary upon the effects of war on



the psychology of individuals. Literary theorists often adapt systems of knowledge developed largely outside the realm of literary studies and impose them upon literary texts for the purpose of discovering or developing new and unique understandings of those texts that a traditional literary critic might not be intellectually equipped to recognize.

With that said, some literary critics and theorists deny that there is a distinct difference between literary criticism and literary theory and argue that literary theory is simply a more advanced form of literary criticism. Other critics argue that literary theory itself is far more systematic, developed and scholarly than literary criticism, and hence of a far greater intellectual and critical value than traditional literary criticism per se. Rarely do different groups of literary theorists agree exactly as to how to define what literary theory is and how it is similar to or different from traditional literary criticism.

Today, literary theory is practiced by a vast majority of college literature professors, research scholars, and students throughout English, literature, and humanities departments in North America and Europe. While some literary scholars debate the ultimate value of literary theory as a method of interpretation (and some critics, in fact, object to the practicality of literary theory entirely), it is nevertheless vital for students of literature to understand the core principles of literary theory and be able to use those same principles to interpret literary texts. Most students studying literature at the college level are, to some degree or another, trained not simply to be critics of literature but, moreover, to function as theorists of literature with the ability to offer interpretations of literary texts through several different theoretical perspectives.

The study of literary theory is challenging, especially for students who are relatively new to the field. It takes time, patience, and practice for students to get used to the unique and sometimes highly specialized language that literary theorists tend to use in their writings as well as the often complicated and detailed arguments they make. As you are exposed to literary theory, take the time to carefully consider the argument being made, to re-read when you find yourself confused by a statement, and to look up and acquaint yourself with any language or terminology you are exposed to and not familiar with (the glossary of terms provided in this course will prove helpful for that). Literary theory can be quite challenging to master but such nevertheless can allow for incredibly insights into literary texts that would otherwise be unreachable without making use of the interpretive apparatus of literary theory.

### **An Introduction to Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

William Shakespeare's 1602 play *Hamlet* is arguably the single most "theorized" literary text in the English language. *Hamlet's* aesthetic, psychological, political, philosophical, and literary depth and richness has made the play not only among the most frequently performed, adapted, revised, and studied texts in English literature but also among the most widely taught, debated, and researched literary texts in the world. Several hundred scholarly books and thousands of scholarly articles have been published about *Hamlet* over the last hundred years alone, with new articles and scholarly books appearing every year on the topic of Shakespeare's most famous and controversial



play. The play's richness and ambiguity—as well as its revolutionary style and characterizations—allows for a plethora of different interpretations to be reasonably applied to it, hence the reason the literary theorist Harold Bloom refers to *Hamlet* as a “poem unlimited.” Nearly every form of literary theory that we will study in this course—from psychoanalysis and new historicism to feminist theory and queer theory—can be readily applied to *Hamlet* in order to develop a deeper critical understanding of the play. In this course, our readings about different literary theories will be supported not only with brief essays that seek to provide students with a general overview of the theories at hand, but also with interpretations of *Hamlet* through the perspective of the literary theories we study.

The purpose of this exercise is for you to be able to not only see the theories we study be put into practical use, but also to be able to recognize the different ways a single text can be interpreted using different literary theories. That is not to suggest that a definitive critical or theoretical reading of *Hamlet* will be offered in this course. Instead, *Hamlet* will be used as a springboard through which we will be able to recognize how different literary theories can be applied to a literary text in order to explore new dimensions of interpretation.

### Study Questions

1. What is the difference between the act of traditional literary criticism and literary theory?
2. What are some of the critical advantages and disadvantages of literary theory?

### The Early Origins of Literary Theory: Plato and Aristotle

While literary theory, as a school of thought or mode of literary criticism, is very much a product of the mid- to late- 20<sup>th</sup> century academic world, the first recorded “theories” of literature extend back to the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle is widely considered to be the Western world's first true literary theorist. While Plato (who was Aristotle's teacher) was among the first intellectuals to give careful consideration to the role and function of literature in society, Aristotle presented the first fully developed theory as to how literary art can and should function within society.

#### Plato (429-347 BCE)

While Aristotle gave careful consideration to the function and roles of literature in his *Poetics*, his teacher Plato also offered an extended critique and definition of the role of literature in society in his dialogues *The Republic* and *The Symposium*. In *The Republic*, Plato offers a rather pointed and stark critique of literature's role and purpose in society. Plato believed that literature—specifically drama and poetry—were dangerous to the stability of what he envisioned to be an ideal republic or city state. He argued that the arts served to shape character and that an ideal society must itself train



and educate its citizens, hence the arts must be strictly censored. Furthermore, Plato argued that an artistic work is always a copy of a copy, hence an artistic work always imitates something real, and all things which are real are an imitation of a universal concept or idea (what Plato called “the really real”), thus all works of art are copies of copies and not fully true or real. Coupled with the ability of an artistic work to stir emotions and inspire action, the illusionary nature of art made such dangerous to society in Plato’s view. On the other hand, in his dialogues *Ion* and *The Symposium*, Plato speculated that artists make better copies of that which is true rather than which can be discovered in reality; hence, the artist can be understood as something like a prophet or visionary.

Plato’s theory of art as imitation of truth had a tremendous influence upon early literary critics and theorists during the Renaissance and 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom often speculated as to the role and function of art as imitation of reality. While modern and contemporary literary theorists tend not to accept Plato’s notion of art as being a dangerous social force, in fact, most literary theorists take exactly the opposite perspective of Plato, especially in the case of Marxist and new historicist theorists. Most literary theorists argue that literature is in fact a liberating force; Plato has had a tremendous impact on the development of literary theory. In fact, many contemporary literary theorists argue that Plato’s theory of art as imitation served to first introduce a theory of literature to the Western world. The most lasting and potent aspect of Plato’s theory, surely, is his “Allegory of the Cave” from Book VII of *The Republic*. In this allegorical vision, Plato offers an image of chained prisoners facing a wall within a dark cave. Behind the prisoners are a high wall and a fire, and between the wall and the fire is a group of actors holding stick puppets. The prisoners can only see the shadows cast by the puppets, which they will understand to be their entire world or reality. If the prisoners are ever released, Plato argued, they would stumble about, be blinded by the fire, and eventually realize that the puppets are only shadows of a far greater reality. Once released, the prisoners will then come to see reality for what it truly is and will realize that the shadows they had seen before were mere copies of reality itself. For Plato, those shadows represented images of truth (or symbols of a greater reality) and served, also, as illusionary representations of truth. Plato’s allegory has served, then, to represent humanity’s inability to see larger truths. While Plato was contending that art served, in essence, to block humans from seeing and understanding larger truths, some literary theorists feel that literary theory offers a method through which people can begin to comprehend greater truths by revealing to them the hidden machinations of reality which they are blind to.





## Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE)

In his *Poetics* (335 BCE)—of which two parts were composed and only the first of which survives—Aristotle offered the world’s first recorded definition and theory of poetry and drama. Here, Aristotle considers the “first principles” of “poetry,” which he defines mainly as drama in terms of this argument. A work of tragedy, according to Aristotle, should consist of the following elements: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Aristotle argued that the plot of a tragedy should be logical and flow in a reasonable and realistic manner. These logical plot movements will come as a surprise to readers but make complete sense to the audience afterward. Ideally, a tragic plot should be complicated and involve the protagonist moving from good fortune to disaster and then to death, with the protagonist realizing along the way the cause of his misery in order to be released from such. A tragic protagonist, Aristotle argued, should be moral and inherently good, act appropriate to his circumstances, and be consistent and realistic in his actions. A character’s thoughts should also be spoken and delivered clearly to the audience through the use of clear and proper diction. The melody of the tragedy should be delivered by a chorus who is part of the action of the play. The spectacle of the play—i.e. the costumes and setting—is considered by Aristotle to be of little importance and cannot make up for poor acting or an illogical plot. While Aristotle’s ideas might not seem remarkable or revolutionary now, he nevertheless was the first intellectual to develop a true theory of what tragic drama was and how it should and could operate. Aristotle’s *Poetics* should be understood not as a strict set of theories for interpreting literature but, instead, as the first systematic critical approach to understanding how a piece of literature can and should operate.

### Application to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* does not respond, directly, to either Plato or Aristotle’s notions or theories of literature. In fact, it is not known for certain whether Shakespeare himself read either Plato or Aristotle, though today most scholars consider it to be likely that he was at least familiar with the basic ideas of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Plato would certainly have viewed *Hamlet* as a fairly dangerous work of literature, especially given that its protagonist so flagrantly challenges state authority. A theorist—of whom there are probably very few today—who might accept Plato’s notion of art as being dangerous would point to *Hamlet* as a text which might inspire social and political revolte against political rule. A theorist operating within Plato’s notions of artistic power might also point to the character of Hamlet as being a perfected, artistic copy of a real human being. Critics have long celebrated Hamlet for being, in essence, among the most complex and realistic characters in all of Western literature. While Hamlet is certainly not an ideal human being—he is, after all, confused, doubtful, angry, and irrational throughout the play—he is as close to a perfect copy of a real, thinking human being as literature has



ever seen. Thus, in Plato's terms, *Hamlet* is a superior work of art. Furthermore, a Plato-minded theorist would see *Hamlet* as providing an accurate imitation of various human psychologies. From Hamlet's tortured intellectual questioning and doubt, to Ophelia's grief and confusion, to Claudius's guilt and hunger for self-preservation, a Plato-minded theorist would argue that *Hamlet* provides a decidedly true and realistic vision of human behavior and psychology and serves, then, to reveal deeper psychological truths to those who read or view it.

Aristotle, however, would probably have been troubled by Hamlet's lack of conformity to the standards of ancient drama but would have realized that *Hamlet* fits in with his definition of an ideal tragic drama. A theorist exploring the structure of tragic drama through the critical perspective of Aristotle would argue that the play functions, in large part, as an ideal tragic drama. In fact, *Hamlet* fits quite closely in line with Aristotle's principles of tragic drama. Not only does Hamlet follow Aristotle's notion of a tragic plot being ultimately logical, but Hamlet himself behaves in what the audience comes to realize is, indeed, a logical manner given his circumstances. His diction, which moves back and forth from being intellectual to witty to jocular to melancholy, is always appropriate to his emotional and intellectual state of mind. Furthermore, the text of *Hamlet* places far more emphasis on plot and thought than mere theatrical spectacle. Hamlet is, inherently, a good and moral person, though he does not always act in what appears to be a good manner. While Aristotle might have been troubled by Hamlet's violent actions throughout the play, he very well might have come to recognize Hamlet's commitment to ultimate goodness and morality. A theorist reading Hamlet through the perspective of Aristotle would also appreciate the manner in which Hamlet moves from good fortune to disaster and ultimate self-realization, just as Aristotle argued that an ideal tragic character should. A theorist reading *Hamlet* while concentrating on Aristotle's theories of proper drama might argue that Hamlet, while violating and subverting some of the basic principles of Aristotle's theory of tragic drama (for the play lacks a chorus and its supernatural elements render it unrealistic), in fact ultimately operates in a fairly close relation to Aristotle's theories.

### Study Questions:

1. What is the difference between Aristotle and Plato's conceptions of literature and art?
2. Why did Plato feel literature and art to be a dangerous social and political force?
3. How did Aristotle help to create the field of literary theory?
4. How did Aristotle conceptualize the proper form of tragedy?



## De Saussure's Linguistic Theories

Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualized language as a system of differences. Each element of a language, according to de Saussure, is defined by its difference from other elements within the same language. For example, the primary manner of recognizing the letter "A" is through recognizing its differences from all the other letters in the same alphabet. Language, according to de Saussure, is a system of signs, and each sign, then, can be understood as a combination of a form (which is the "signifier") and a particular meaning (which is the "signified"). The relationship which occurs between the signified and the signifier, then, is based upon an agreed on convention, rather than some sort of natural resemblance. For example, I am writing this piece on de Saussure's theories of linguistics on what is called a "computer," but which might as easily have been called a "car." It is only because of an agreed upon convention of language that I call this object a "computer." You understand just what I mean when I offer the word "computer" to you. A language, then, according to de Saussure can be best understood as a system of signs that organizes the world and renders it comprehensible to us. Different languages, however, divide the world in different ways.

Literary theorists have taken a particular interest in de Saussure's notions and theories of language. Recent linguistically-focused literary theorists have identified a difference between what is termed "poetics" and "hermeneutics." The study of "poetics" offers a conception of how meaning is generated. "Hermeneutics," however, takes the opposite approach and explores questions of what a text means and different meanings which can be applied to it. The study of poetics and linguistics can be understood as being similar, though they are in fact quite different: the meaning of a piece of poetry written in a particular language would be far more relative and open to interpretation than a simple declarative statement written in the same language. In that respect, modern literary theory is far more similar to the practice of hermeneutics, for literary theory seems not to understand the function of literature but, instead, understands what a literary text means or suggests. Literary theorists, interpreting through the lens of linguistics, tend to examine the experience of reading the literature and interpreting the various systems of signs which are presented throughout it.

### Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

A Saussurean linguistic approach to *Hamlet* would focus upon a close study of the language of the play and the ways in which the play's language serves to structure the play. Such a reading would focus not quite on the motivations of characters and various psychological elements of the play. In fact, most any theoretical approach to the play that seeks to come to some understanding of the play's meaning would be grounded, to



some measure, in the practice of “hermeneutics.” This method of approach would focus not on how Hamlet functions as a structured linguistic text but, instead, upon what meanings the play embodies and generates. However, an interpretation of the play that focuses on the play’s linguistic structures—the various signs and symbols that serve to structure the play—would be an act of “poetics” rather “hermeneutics.”

### **Study Questions:**

1. What is the difference between poetics and hermeneutics?
2. Modern literary theory is more akin to which: poetics or hermeneutics?

### **Roland Barthes’s Semiotics**

Roland Barthes was a French literary critic and semiotician. Barthes’s major critical concern was with exploring how a culture’s system of values and various ideologies are encoded in the culture’s languages and other social interactions. Barthes contended that these values and ideologies were spread throughout cultures through stereotypes or “mythologies.” Barthes believed that language was a powerful force that served to influence the way people understood the world around them. Language, according to Barthes, is always controlled by various cultural, social, and political ideologies and serves to structure the way we conceptualize the world in which we reside. Barthes’s theoretical work, then, served to challenge institutions and languages that allowed for one group of people to govern and control another. What Barthes was ultimately contending, then, was that most of what we consider to be natural within a culture is, in fact, based upon relative and subjective historical social, political, and cultural constructs. Barthes’s later work in semiotics (which is the study of signs and symbols), developed out of conception of the relativity of language. Through his study of signs and symbols, Barthes concluded that unlikely objects are signs and always function as part of a larger systems of signs in which the true meaning and intention of the signs themselves.

### **Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

A theorist approaching Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* through the perspective of Barthes’s notions of semiotics would focus on the ways in which the play enacts and critiques particular mythologies and stereotypes of Elizabethan England, such as rights of succession, phallogentric ideological rule, and conflicts between the arising Protestant faith and Catholicism.



## Study Questions:

1. What is semiotics?
2. How does language shape how we understand the world according to Barthes?

## Derrida and Deconstruction

In the most general sense, Jacques Derrida's notion of deconstruction questions the very structural foundations of Western thought by showing how such privileges particular terms, ideas, and concepts over others at the expense of meaning and truth. The sort of metaphysical notions that are analyzed through deconstruction are characterized, in essence, by the assumption that there are ultimate sources of meaning which are encoded throughout existence. Deconstruction tends to argue that every privileged term, idea, or concept depends upon a suppressed term for its meaning. Language, then, is considered to be an arbitrary and relative construct in the view of a deconstructionist. According to Derrida, languages—and texts, moreover—never contain full and precise meanings that can be fully realized. For a deconstructionist, a text is not itself quite a structure per se, but instead a chain of signs and symbols which serve to generate meaning, but none of those signs or symbols occupy a set and unchanging position or meaning within language. Deconstruction tends to contend that the textual world is ultimately unknowable through the textual act of philosophy, for language itself is not obedient and set. Deconstructionists claim, furthermore, that one's individuality is itself a product of the linguistic structures—structures which exist before we do—which establish and assert our identities.

Deconstruction is, indeed, a very difficult concept for one to wrap his or her mind around. In fact, many textbooks and dictionaries of philosophy define the term and its meaning(s) in radically different manners. Perhaps, the best example of a deconstructive textual act can be found through a consideration of the various conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Since the time Kennedy was killed, various groups of scholars, journalists, and historians have questioned the official ruling that Lee Harvey Oswald acted as the lone murderer of Kennedy and assert that there was a conspiracy behind the assassination. These conspiracy theorists, however, offer a wide range of different assertions and interpretations of the evidence provided about Kennedy's assassination. Virtually all of these theories conflict with each other and focus upon the different ways in which the evidence at hand can be logically interpreted, in turn revealing the conflicting meanings that exist behind the language of the countless reports and pieces of evidence that have been assembled over the last several decades. These conspiracy theorists operate, essentially, as deconstructionists by drawing our attention to the plethora of often



contradictory ways in which particular assertions/statements/facts/arguments takes from the assassination investigation can be understood and interpreted, in turn, highlighting the futility and impossibility of realizing any sort of inherent truth.

### **Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

A play as linguistically and creatively rich as *Hamlet* is ripe for a deconstructive reading. In fact, it can be argued that given the thousands of different theoretical approaches that *Hamlet* has been given, that the play itself is virtually self-deconstructive. A deconstructionist might focus on what seems to be a very slight or minor element of the play to demonstrate its innate contradictions and layers on meanings in order to offer further insight into *Hamlet's* meanings, intentions, and creative context. For example, a deconstructionist might point to an apparent contradiction within the play: in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that Hamlet is a college student (which might place him in his late teens or early 20s) and also 30 years-old. Many critics have contended that this seeming discrepancy represents a mistake on Shakespeare's part. A deconstructionist would probe this issue in-depth and point out a number of possible ways to interpret this seeming discrepancy, and argue, perhaps that Shakespeare never states that Hamlet is a college-age student (he might be a professor, a visiting student, a graduate student, or a minister) and that Hamlet himself never identifies himself as being 30. Or, what we conceptualize today as being the typical age for a college student might have been different in Elizabethan England, or in the world in which *Hamlet* takes place, Shakespeare might have been suggesting that Hamlet ages in a metaphorical sense over the course of the play. This discrepancy in age might represent a trace of an earlier version of the play in which Hamlet was imagined by Shakespeare as being younger than he was in the later version. The number "30" was a code word used by King James VI (who might have been an influence on Shakespeare's characterization of Hamlet), so Shakespeare might have chosen 30 as Hamlet's age in order to allude to King James VI, and so on. Deconstructive interpretations are rarely definitive, instead they seek to always problematize a text's meaning and suggest the depths to which a text operates.

#### **Study Questions:**

1. How, as a theoretical practice, does deconstruction operate?
2. Why is deconstruction a valuable method for interpreting a literary text?
3. How, in Derrida's view, do languages operate? What are the limitations of a language?



## Lacan and the Mirror Stage

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan first developed his theory of the mirror stage in response to Sigmund Freud's notion of an ego-based psychology, which itself served to suggest a decidedly rational form of self-consciousness which Lacan rejected. According to Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, a child recognizes his own image in a mirror sometime before he is 18 months old, an event which marks the child's first realization of self-hood. This sudden realization of self leads the child, according to Lacan, to the realization not only of his possession of his own identity that renders him distinct and separate from others but, moreover, the realization of the existence of others independent of himself and the differences between subject and object. Lacan further posited that this realization of self through reflection that occurs during the mirror stage illustrates the manner in which people recognize and create themselves through the image they recognize of other people, and in turn suggests that our identities are structured upon our understanding of the image (or reflection) of other people as well as the realization of the difference between ourselves and others. Lacan ultimately felt—unlike Freud—that human identity is not consistent but is instead a constantly changing assemblage of images and understandings of self. Lacan contended that once the mirror stage of one's psychological development has ceased, the subject has created a series of false or inauthentic identity systems around himself and that even close psychological analysis cannot break through those inauthentic identities to arrive back at a true and ultimate self. What Lacan ultimately asserted was that the human psyche is, itself, structured entirely by and through language acts—for people recognize and consider others through language, hence identity is constructed largely through language—and does not arise or exist separate from such once the mirror stage has been entered.

### Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Lacan wrote about *Hamlet* in his famous essay "Desire and Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," in which he examined the linguistic structure of the play and argued, counter to Freud's rather psychosexual reading of the play, that Hamlet is assuming the role of the "phallus"—that is, the role of his father or patriarch—in the play and, hence, is increasingly removed from any sort of reality and central identity, which in turn greatly upsets his psyche. Hamlet constructs his identity at the start of the play under the influence of his dead father's identity (something which Shakespeare highlights by giving Hamlet and his father the same name). A theorist making use of Lacan's notion of the mirror stage might also argue that Hamlet perfectly exemplifies someone who lacks a core, fundamental identity, and possesses an identity which only reflects others' identities. Shakespeare presents Hamlet's psychic state and identity as constantly shifting throughout the play without offering any suggestions of there being a core or fundamental identity within him. Instead, Shakespeare figures Hamlet as possessing a psyche which is in a state of near constant flux, just as Lacan conceptualized all people who emerge from the mirror stage as being lacking in a core identity. While a Lacanian theorist would not suggest that Shakespeare invented a theory of the mirror stage in the play, he or she might suggest that Shakespeare's play reflects, itself, an element of human psychology that would be conceptualized three centuries later by Lacan.



## Study Question:

1. Why is the mirror stage of human development considered to be so important to the construction of identity?

### Introduction to Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is one of the most progressive and dynamic modes of literary theory. However, there is no precise definition of feminist theory. In the most general sense, feminist theory serves to promote female identity, argue for women's rights, and promote the writings of women. As a literary theory, feminist theory critiques the structures within cultures and societies which organizes sexual and gender identities as an opposition between men and women. Feminist theory offers critiques of male-centered modes of thought and often concentrates its attentions upon female authors and the experiences of women. Feminist theory also closely examines the role of women in the development of popular culture, explores the question of whether a particular female language can be said to exist, and considers the construction and meanings of different notions of womanhood and gender roles throughout history. What is known as "French feminism" positions the identity of "women" as being a radical political, cultural, and social force that serves to reject and subvert assumptions linked to male discourse and masculine forces of political power. A number of feminist theorists reject a number of the fundamental notions of psychoanalysis and contend that such is male-biased, anti-women, and patriarchal. It can be argued that there is no such thing as feminist theory per se, rather feminist theory is grounded not in any sort of singular theory but linked to a variety of different literary theories.

### Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

A feminist theory based interpretation of *Hamlet* would focus, most particularly, upon the characters of Ophelia and Gertrude. In fact, hundreds of feminist theory chapters and articles—as well as several academic studies—have focused upon the character of Ophelia. A feminist theoretical reading of *Hamlet* might argue that Ophelia—who is driven to seeming madness throughout the play and, possibly, eventual suicide—is figured as being repressed, abused, ignored, and renounced by male characters throughout the play because of her gender. Ophelia, then, represents a lack of consideration given to the feminine in the world of the play, as well as the inability for male characters within the play to understand the plight and psychologies of women. This sort of feminist reading of the play positions the world of *Hamlet* as being decidedly sexist and masculine and suggests that the play offers, then, a critique of a male-dominated and patriarchal society. This sort of feminist approach might suggest that the female characters in the play are used to critique the sort of male dominated society





in which Shakespeare himself lived. While some feminist theorists have suggested that Shakespeare demonstrates a sexist ideology within the play, most feminist theorists view the play as asserting a somewhat enlightened and progressive view of women, with the play itself serving as a critique of a male dominated society. Other feminist theories have argued that Hamlet himself is figured as a woman in the text, for he violates patriarchal power and rule and is subjected to the political force of a patriarchal power that denies him his intrinsic human rights and desires. A feminist theorist might argue that Shakespeare places Hamlet in the position of a woman in the play in order to critique and examine the nature of patriarchal power.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What are the goals of feminist theory?
2. How does feminist theory critique standard modes of male-dominated political, social, and cultural powers?

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory—which is sometimes incorrectly identified as being simply a form of homosexual and bisexual focused criticism or theory—serves to openly and frankly question and examine traditional forms and constructions of sexuality throughout literary texts. Queer theorists understand sexuality to be a highly fraught and unstable social, culture, and political structure which has produced countless textual, philosophical, political, social, and other cultural formations throughout human history. Queer theorists mainly examine the manners through which texts examine, contest, question, counter, and reject various forms of sexuality. In general, queer theorists do not assume any form or practice of sexuality to be normal, proper, or authentic. Instead, sexuality is considered to be entirely a social construction, though a changeable and rather unstable social construction at that. Queer theorists assume, then, that there is no ideal, true, or absolute form or practice of sexuality (or gender), and that the propriety of all forms and practices of sexuality are relative to various political, social, and cultural attitudes. Queer theory focuses on examining the different ways in which literary texts have understood and negotiated sexuality, as well as the ways they have possibly invented, promoted, repressed, and altered modes of sexuality. Queer theorists are not, however, interested only in textual performances of sexuality but also upon textual enactments of gender and gender relations. Queer theory does not serve to promote or repudiate any particular type of sexuality but to instead recognize sexuality—and, by extension, gender—as something which is both malleable and relative throughout different human cultures and historical time periods. Most queer theorists consider gender to be something which is performed, something not which one is born with, but, instead, something which one enacts due to cultural, political, and social pressures. A



number of queer theorists also consider the ways in which not just sexual relations but also social relations between people of the same sex and gender have been controlled and repressed by various cultural, social, and political systems in order to promote a decidedly heterosexual agenda. These theorists focus on examining “homosocial” relations in literary texts.

### **Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet***

A queer theory reading of *Hamlet* would focus on Hamlet’s seemingly conflicted sexuality throughout the play. This reading would take into consideration Hamlet’s complicated and tortured romantic relationship with Ophelia and, moreover, Hamlet’s close relationship with Horatio. While there is nothing in the play that directly suggests that Horatio and Hamlet are involved in a romantic or sexual relationship—in fact, a queer theorist would point out that the category or concept of “homosexuality” did not exist in Shakespeare’s time; while people certainly engaged in homosexual relations, the concept of “homosexuality” (as well as “heterosexuality”) as a lifestyle did not exist in Elizabethan England—a queer theorist would consider the ways in which Hamlet and Horatio’s close relationship seems to violate the standard Elizabethan concepts of masculine relations. A queer theorist might suggest that there exists an underlying homosexual tension between Hamlet and Horatio, as evidenced in the close bond that exists between the characters, Hamlet’s problematic relationship with Ophelia, and Horatio’s grief at the death of Hamlet. Another queer theory approach to the play might focus not on possible homosexual desire between Hamlet and Horatio but instead upon what might be termed homosocial desire, which refers to the desire for companionship, existing between people of the same sex or gender, a relationship which is often repressed by the behavioral gender norms of a given society. According to a homosocial/queer theory reading of the play, it might be suggested that Hamlet feels a particular desire for male companionship and socialization that is not permitted in his world, hence the extraordinary bond which appears to exist between male characters in the play and, perhaps, the nature of the problems which exist between Hamlet and Ophelia. While such a reading would not claim to offer a definitive reading or interpretation of the play, such might reveal some of the sexual and gender undercurrents that underline both the play and Shakespeare’s own attitudes toward sexuality and gender and hence allow for a richer and more complex understanding of the play and the world it both reflects and presents.

#### **Study Questions:**

1. What does queer theory suggest about the nature of human sexuality?
2. How do literary texts reflect, comment upon and assert sexual norms in society?



## Marxist Theory

Marxist theory—which is drawn from the economic, social, and political theories of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century economist Karl Marx—is among the most popular, influential, and controversial theories of literature currently practiced throughout the Western academic world. In general terms, Marxist theory can be described as an “economic” approach to interpreting literary texts. Marxist theorists often examine literary texts with a critical eye toward their various economic, ideological and social contexts, suggestions, and assertions. Marxist theorists tend to focus their interpretations on considering how literary texts depict class oppression and strife and social inequality and, in turn, serve to critique elements of capitalistic Western life. Marxist theorists also consider how literary texts subvert and even overturn ordinary forms of social and political order and thus present or enable new forms of social and political perception and interaction. Marxist theorists tend to give critical thought to how literary texts participate in or resist mass media and other forms of popular, capitalistic culture. They consider how such literary resistances might suggest possibilities for social revolution and, mutually, how the ruling classes might manipulate such for the purpose of social control over the other classes. Marxist theorists often take an interest in how an author’s own class, political positions, and other ideological positions serve to influence his or her writings, considering the ideologies presented within the text as well as the economic and social conditions under which particular texts are composed, published, publicized, sold, and consumed by the public.

Today, what is known as “New Marxist Criticism” is quite popular among a number of critical theorists. Contemporary Marxist theoretical approaches, to some measure, part ways with formal and traditional modes of strict Marxist theory and consider how Marxism (and Marxist theory itself) functions in terms of other modes of literary theory. A number of literary theorists, despite aligning themselves with forms of literary theory other than Marxism, often make active use of the principles of Marxism in their theoretical work, particularly practitioners of such decidedly socially and politically minded forms of theory as new historicism, queer theory, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory.

### Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

While *Hamlet* might not seem to be a likely text for a strong Marxist reading given that its protagonist is a man of privilege and that the play takes place in a fictional version of 16<sup>th</sup> century Denmark, *Hamlet* can be interpreted through a number of different Marxist theoretical approaches. A Marxist critic might take a particular interest in the manner in which Hamlet subverts Claudius’s rule by engaging in acts of subterfuge, manipulation, and revolution in order to overcome his oppressive rule over him. A critic may also argue that Hamlet’s actions serve to demonstrate a way by which an oppressive



ideological regime can be countered and overcome. A Marxist theorist might argue that Claudius killed his brother King Hamlet in order to gain political, social, and economic power, and hence might be viewed as a figure who is corrupted by his desire for social and political power. Hamlet himself steps outside of the standards, rules, and norms established and encouraged by the ruling class that he was once a part of in order to resist its oppressive ideology. Such a critical viewpoint might serve to argue that *Hamlet* is at least partly about Hamlet's own sudden separation from and realization of the ideological faults of the political structure he is or was a part of. Also, a Marxist theorist might take interest in the plays focus on characters who belong to the ruling class and the lack of "voice" given to common people in the play. One may argue that Shakespeare—who, himself, was born to a commoner and was himself very much a member of what we would today call the "working class" or "middle class"—is issuing an attack or critique of the oppressive and morally corrupt ideology of the ruling classes throughout *Hamlet*. Furthermore, a Marxist critique of *Hamlet* might take special interest in the famous grave digging scene of the play, and point out how Shakespeare positions the gravedigger—who is the only common or non-privileged character given a prominent voice within the narrative—as a source of wisdom capable of recognizing intrinsic truths about existence and the nature of the events that have come to pass within the story that the high-ranking and privileged characters in the play, including Hamlet himself, are unable to realize partly because of their own class positions. While a Marxist theorist would probably not argue that Shakespeare was himself quite a proto-Marxist, he or she might argue that in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was anticipating and recognizing ideas concerning class distinctions and attitudes that were further developed by Karl Marx over 300 years later.

### Study questions:

1. How does Marxist theory suggest that literature critiques capitalistic culture?
2. What is the difference between "New Marxist Criticism" and traditional Marxist theory?

### Frederic Jameson's Post-Marxism

Frederic Jameson is among the world's leading Marxist theorists, though his work also serves to critique and rework traditional forms of Marxist theory (hence his designation as a "Post-Marxist"). What is unique about Jameson's Marxist approach is its measure of self-awareness, with his theories serving to focus not only on responding to critical questions but, moreover, reflecting upon the essence and purposes of the questions themselves. Jameson's central critical concern is with what he calls "the political unconscious." Through his notion of "the political unconscious," Jameson asserts that the historical past and its intrinsic relations to the present can be conceptualized only in the form of texts. Jameson calls for theorists to always historicize texts, to always place literary texts in their various historical contexts when engaging in any act of



interpretation. Jameson argues that texts—and narratives of all types and forms—structure our experiences of the past (and, to some measure, our present). Jameson contends that Marxist perspectives on literature can serve to restore and recapture revolutionary ideals and concepts during times of political and cultural repression.

### **Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

A Jamesonian approach to *Hamlet* would focus on Hamlet's position as an ideological revolutionary within the world of the play and, also, before his Elizabethan and modern audiences. A Jamesonian approach to *Hamlet* might consider not only Hamlet's own acute political unconscious, but also the ways in which the character relates to and insists on understanding and considering past events as he attempts to formulate his course of action. In fact, Hamlet's insistence on trying to reach an understanding/realization of what occurred in the past—namely, his father's murder—in order to decide his future actions can be understood as something of a Jamesonian impulse. A Jamesonian approach might consider the ways in which the figure of Hamlet has been reconceptualized throughout popular Western culture as a revolutionary figure fighting against political and cultural corruption. A Jamesonian approach might consider, for example, how Hamlet has stood as a model for other idealized heroic figures who have rebelled against corrupt political regimes throughout popular culture, such as the character of Batman in the films *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.

#### **Study Question:**

1. How does Jameson's Marxist approach part ways with traditional Marxist theory?

### **Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque**

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the "carnavalesque" bears more than some resemblance to the literary act of parody, though the literary act of carnival is a far more politically aware act than parody tends to be. Like parody, the act of carnival serves to critique and subvert norms of political, social, and cultural behavior. The act of carnival, then, serves through literature to critique notions and rules of established order, attack, deconstruct, and refuse to obey the rules and orders of systems of authority, which in turn allows for a critique of established laws and rules of a given society. In literature, the carnivalesque involves providing a public venue through which standards, norms and laws of governing cultures and societies are questioned, reworked, tested, and countered.



## Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

*Hamlet*, in many respects, serves as the perfect example of the Carnavalesque, especially in the famous “Mousetrap” scene in which the actors reenact the very scene of Hamlet’s father’s death. In this scene in particular, standard political and social rule is subverted and over-turned, however temporarily, in order to critique, mock, and question standard authority and norms of behavior within the political world of the play.

### Study Question:

1. How does the Carnavalesque serve to question social and political norms and rules?

## Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalysis is not particularly a literary critical practice but, rather, a clinical and therapeutic practice and methodology or body of knowledge. Basically, psychoanalysis refers to the systematic study of the mind. While many psychoanalytic theorists argue that there are a various fundamental connections between literature and psychoanalysis, with literature serving as something of a practice area for psychoanalysts, the practice of psychoanalysis outside of the literary field serves to resolve the problems of an individual, while literary psychoanalysis does not necessarily focus on an individual psyche. Many of the principles of psychoanalytic theory were developed from the theories of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, as well as psychoanalysts Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan. Freud’s notion of the unconscious and the relationship between dreams and repression to the artistic process served to establish develop psychoanalytic theory.

Freudian concepts of psychoanalysis are generally applied to literary texts in the following three ways:

1. By considering the author’s own psychological conflicts as evidenced within his or her literary work.
2. By analyzing the psyches of literary characters as if they were real human beings.
3. By considering how the literary work brings to light the desires and fears of its readers.

Many theorists have come to believe that Freud’s psychoanalytic notions do not give fair and full consideration to the full richness and complexity of literary texts and thus subordinate literary and artistic matters to the realm of the psychological. Lacan’s revision of Freudian psychology—which considered the linguistic nature of the



unconscious—served to restore the prestige and applicability of psychological to literature.

### **Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

Of all works of Western literature, probably no single text has undergone more psychoanalytic theoretical consideration than *Hamlet*. Psychoanalytic theorists have been interested in the psychological depth of Hamlet and have attempted to conceptualize him through a variety of different psychoanalytic perspectives, the most famous of which is Ernest Jones's argument that Hamlet suffers from an Oedipal complex throughout the play that causes his seeming psychological problems. Psychoanalytic theorists have also "diagnosed" Hamlet with a range of psychological maladies and offered a range of different ways of conceptualizing Hamlet's mental processes as well as those of the other characters in a story. Psychoanalytic theorists have also proposed numerous interpretations of the play through the perspective of Shakespeare's own psychology, with some theorists suggesting that the play functions as an attempt—whether conscious or not—by Shakespeare's to resolve the trauma of his father and/or son's death.

#### **Study Questions:**

1. What is the difference between psychoanalytic theory as it is applied to clinical and literary texts?
2. What did many psychoanalysts doubt and critique about Freud's early psychoanalytic theories?

### **Applying Theory to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice***

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is among the most widely read and studied English novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one which has been studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Part of the novel's appeal can be traced to its psychological richness and depth. Austen's characters, in *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, seem to think and act like real people, and the worlds Austen creates around her characters seem logical and realistic, hence theorists study the novel for the insight it offers into 19<sup>th</sup> century England and, moreover, human psychology and gender relations. The novel is regularly interpreted from a feminist theory perspective, with theorists arguing that Elizabeth Bennet resists patriarchal authority and refuses to subject herself to the will and power of men. Marxist theorists have explored the various ways in which the novel seems to both critique and celebrate (especially in terms of Austen's representation of Mr. Darcy) capitalism. A queer theory reading of the novel might focus on the ways in which



various characters violate sexual and romantic norms of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as the desire for homosocial relations that carries throughout the novel. A psychoanalytic theorist might speculate as to the ways in which the character of Elizabeth Bennet reflects the ideals and subconscious desires of Austen herself. A new historical theorist might consider how the novel serves to retroactively define the ideals and ideas of the English Romantic movement, as well as reflect upon the cultural, political, and social circumstances of Austen's own world. Austen's novel remains one of the most debated, studied, and theorized literary texts in the English language.

### **New Historicism**

As a theoretical approach, new historicism shares a great deal in common with the critical/theoretical practice of cultural materialism. Both theoretical modes originate in the study of Renaissance English literature, both draw their methods and purposes from Marxism and Post-Structuralism, both give careful consideration to the production of ideologies and political systems, and both methods consider the ways in which various cultural, political, and social discourses operate as vehicles of power. However, new historicism focuses in particular on the economic and historical contexts of cultures, examines the intertextual relations between various texts and methods of discourse, and views all literary texts as historical documents. New historicists tend to believe that all forms of discourse and writing interact with and are determined by other discourses and writings in a particular historical time. The main differences between new historicism and cultural materialism can be found in the lack of willingness on the part of new historicists to suggest a hierarchy of readily identifiable causes and effects as it charts connections between texts. New historicists ultimately view history as being anything but a linear, direct, and discrete series of events but, instead, as a series of subjective and fractured events which exist only through the medium of text. New historicist literary theorists, then, attempt to place their interpretation of literary texts firmly within their historical contexts, with special attention being given to the marginalized aspects of a text's historical context and setting. The main ideas that most new historicist critics share in common are that:

1. Literary and non-literary texts are not distinct from each other.
2. No single text can provide access to any sort of ultimate truth or unalterable aspect of humanity.
3. All critical methods are, to some measure, subject to the forces of the very culture under which they are created and enacted.
4. To express the discontinuity that is an inherent part of history is to produce a structured, linear narrative that is counter to the very theme it is exploring: namely the nature of a fragmented, discontinuous system.

For new historicists, there is no such thing as historical facts per se, rather all apparent historical facts are open to interpretation due to their inherently textual nature. Hence, there is no such thing as an absolute or fully accurate historical account.





## Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

A great number of critics have explored Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through the lens of new historicism. In fact, the field of new historicism arose out of historical and cultural studies of Shakespeare and Renaissance drama. A new historical reading of *Hamlet* might consider the ways in which the play contests and examines Elizabethan England's monarchy, by virtue of the play's focus on matters of succession, rule, and power. Many new historical approaches to the play attempt to recreate or conceptualized the various historical environments—such as the political systems, as well as the gender, sexual, and class systems—in which the play was composed and enacted in order to reach a stronger and more dynamic understanding of the text and where it came from. A number of new historicist readings of *Hamlet* have focused on how some of the religious conflicts occurring in England during Shakespeare's time—particularly the cultural conflicts surrounding Catholicism and the new Protestant faith—are both directly and indirectly explored throughout the play. A new historicist reading would not attempt to merely understand how *Hamlet* reflects the historical circumstances under which it was created but, moreover, the various and sometimes contradictory historical ideas and movements which influenced the play and which the play comments upon.

### Study Questions:

1. What does it mean for history to be textual according to new historicists?
2. What are the critical intentions and goals of new historicism?
3. What does it mean for history to be fragmented and non-linear?

## Applying Theory to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is among the most studied, debated, contested, and theorized works of Western literature. While some critics feel it offers a scathing attack on colonialist ideology, others feel the novel celebrates and defends colonialization and racism. The novel, however, can be approached, quite readily, from virtually all theoretical approaches. A number of theorists have studied the novel through the perspective of post-colonial theory and have contended, often in response to or in conversation with other post-colonial theorists, that it critiques, celebrates, and even reconciles Europe's colonialization activities throughout Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A Marxist reading of the novel might point to the ways in which the story depicts the violence and cultural repression which surrounds capitalistic enterprises. A psychoanalytic reading of the novel might focus on the complicated psyches of Mr. Kurtz or Marlow and explore their unique psychological motivations and the ways in which their encounters with and within the Congo shift their psychological perspectives. A feminist theorist would explore the three female characters in the play: Marlow's aunt,



Kurtz's native lover, and Kurtz's fiancée back in Europe. Such a feminist reading would point to the lack of power and authority given to women in the text, which reflects the position of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century European society and their lack of involvement in the decidedly patriarchal action of colonialization. A new historicist theorist might consider how the novel both critiques and celebrates imperialism and, also, how it functions as something of a counter-historical account that documents that horrors and ravages of European imperialism in the Congo. A new historicist might also consider how the novel's storyline was reworked into the 1979 Vietnam War set film *Apocalypse Now* and how the story of Marlow's search for and ultimate encounter with Kurtz can be applied to different historical contexts. A queer theory reading of the novel would consider the complicated relationship—which seems akin, in some respects, to a romance—that exists between Marlow and Kurtz and suggest that Marlow's desire to find Kurtz—and his telling the story to his shipmates some time later—indicates a strong desire for homosocial bonding and relation on Marlow's part. These, however, are just a sampling of the various critical and theoretical approaches that can be imposed upon *Heart of Darkness*. Along with *Hamlet*, *Heart of Darkness* is among the most theorized—and theoretically contested—texts in Western literary studies.

### **Eco-Criticism and Eco-Theory**

Eco-criticism and eco-theory explore the various ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship that exists between human beings and the natural environment. An eco-theoretical reading of a literary text will usually examine the manners in which humans and the natural environment interact, influence, and counter each other. Eco-theoretical and eco-critical readings of literary texts tend to focus on how pollution and environmental destruction is examined and considered in literary texts, as well as how humans are depicted as interacting with their natural dwellings, as well as animals, the wilderness, and the earth as a whole. A number of eco-critics and eco-theorists have shown a special interest in exploring and considering how a number of modern and postmodern writers imagine natural and environmental apocalypses. Eco-theory should not be considered to be a mere offshoot of the modern day ecological movement. Eco-theorists do not always adhere closely to the principles of the modern ecology or environmental political movements. In fact, many eco-theorists have shown a measure of skepticism toward the ideological motivations behind contemporary environmental movements.

### **Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

In terms of literary studies, most eco-theoretical readings of literary texts focus on contemporary and 19<sup>th</sup> century texts which actively and directly explore the relationships that exist between human beings and the natural world. *Hamlet*, given its fairly precise



focus on the workings of Hamlet's mind rather than the natural world around him, would seem, at first glance, to be inapplicable to an eco-theory interpretation. However, a close reading of the various references to astronomy, weather, and time in *Hamlet* might result in an eco-theoretical approach that reveals Shakespeare's subtle awareness of and attention to the natural environment. Such a theoretical examination of the text would focus on how various characters describe (and scene descriptions depict) the natural world around them and the ways in which those descriptions can serve to shift our interpretation and understanding of the meaning of the text. This interpretive model might serve to suggest that Shakespeare shows an awareness of how the natural world affects the psyches of its inhabitants. Furthermore, eco-theorists might also consider the implications and ideas surrounding the environmental settings of film and stage adaptations of *Hamlet*. For example, an eco-theorist might be interested in the contemporary, polluted city setting of the recent *Hamlet 2000* film and the ways in which that particular environmental setting might impact some of the story's themes and ideas.

### **Study Question:**

1. What are the critical goals and intentions of eco-theory?

## **Post-Colonial Theory**

Post-colonial theory examines the problems which were posed by Europe's colonialization of various regions of the world throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the cultural, political, and social effects of such. Post-colonial theory examines the origins, effects, and both immediate and long-term political, cultural, and social results of Europe (as well as America's) colonialization of different cultures and regions of the world through the study of various literary texts which depict, sometimes celebrate, and critique and disparage the act of colonialization. Post-colonial theory questions and examines the expansionist imperialism of colonializing nations and cultures and the set of political, social, and cultural values (some of which are still in place) which support imperialism, with special attention given to the complicated relations that occur between the party who colonialized and the party which colonialized. While post-colonial theory does not adhere to a particular methodology or theory per se, post-colonial theory does work within a basic set of critical assumptions, including an opening questioning of the benefits of empire, the effects of racism toward and the exploitation of those who were colonialized, and the political and social positions of both those who colonialized and those who were colonialized. Postcolonial theory attempts, furthermore, to recoup the lost histories of the colonialized subjects and reveal the ways in which colonialization empires have shifted and erased the identities of the colonialized subjects.



## Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Post-colonial theorists tend to focus their theoretical examination on texts from the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, hence post-colonial theory can be more readily attached to a text such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* than *Hamlet*. However, while Shakespeare's play might not directly confront post-colonial issues and concerns, some later productions and reworkings of the play have certainly done so. Postcolonial theorists might take a particular interest in productions of *Hamlet* which have been staged in areas of the world which have been subjected to colonialization, such as Africa and the Middle East. Theorists with a post-colonial focus might examine how the play's political dimensions—which focus on abuses of political power, injustice, and conspiracy—might resonate within parts of the world which have been colonized by European empires. A post-colonial theorist might take note of the ways in which colonized cultures take an interest in the play and view the story of Hamlet as being applicable to the experience of colonialization, with Hamlet being figured as a subject who is violated and abused by an imperial power, which robs him of his rightful place within his culture (Hamlet, after all, is denied his seeming rightful position as king of Denmark by Claudius) and attempts to silence his protests and rebellion through political manipulation.

### Study Questions:

1. What is post-colonial theory?
2. What is the difference between the colonizing and colonized subjects?

## New Frontiers in Literary Theory

Literary theory is a mode of literary study that is constantly undergoing changes in attitudes, approaches, and methods. While Marxist, new historical and feminist theories are still very much in vogue throughout North American and European English and humanities departments, linguistic approaches to literature and structuralism are not as widely undertaken as they once were. A number of new theoretical approaches have been developed since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These new theories of literature tend to be interdisciplinary in their focus and approach and often openly combine elements of different literary theories together to form new theoretical approaches.

Contemporary literary theory tends to focus on exploring questions of identity development, issues in third world and minority literatures, cybernetics and information technologies, the application of chaos theory and game theory to literary texts, and the ways in which popular culture shapes (and is shaped by) literature. Among the most prominent and popular new theoretical approaches to literature are trauma theory and



eco theory, both of which draw their methods from other modes of literary theory, namely psychoanalysis, new historicism, and Marxism. Literary theory, however, is always evolving and adjusting itself to new schools of thought and newly developing academic disciplines throughout the arts and sciences in order to further elucidate the meanings of literary texts.

## Trauma Theory

In the most general sense, trauma theory examines the ways in which traumatic occurrences are processed by and through literary texts. Trauma theory attempts to understand the different ways by which traumatic occurrences are demonstrated, processed, exposed, and repressed throughout a variety of literary and historical texts. Trauma theorists are interested not only in how various writers might attempt to negotiate and resolve their own personal traumas through their writings, but also the ways in which fictional characters attempt to do so, as well as the ways in which literary texts serve to record and pronounce cultural traumas.

The term “trauma” refers to the sudden intrusion of new and unexpected knowledge into someone’s psyche, usually due to a sudden confrontation with violence or death. This traumatic event leaves the survivor emotionally and intellectually divided between what he or she felt or believed in before the event and what he or she now knows or believes in, in turn causing a psychic separation in identity and consciousness, which often leaves the survivor confused, frightened, and disturbed. A traumatic event is often an event which leads one in to an immediate confrontation with the reality or possibility of death, a confrontation which leads to a new and sudden awareness of one’s mortality and vulnerability, something which serves to deeply upset one’s psychic state.

Trauma theorists have shown a particular interest in acts of “testimony” in literary and historical texts. Testimony refers to the attempt by a survivor of a traumatic event to attempt to place him or herself on record, to give voice and meaning (and, by effect, understanding) to the traumatic event which he or she struggles to reconcile him or herself to. Testimony—the assertion and attempted reconciliation of the traumatic event—offers a way for a traumatic event to be ordered, understood, and resolved. Testimony depends upon the testifying subject having a “witness” who will listen, view, or read the testimony; process it; and engage the testifying subject in some discussion or examination of the traumatic event.

### Application in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* is a literary text that is perfectly applicable to a trauma theory interpretation. Hamlet himself, in fact, seems to possess and downright embody a post-traumatic psychology. A psychoanalytic/trauma theory focused interpretation of *Hamlet* might



center on Hamlet's psychology and argue that he, in many respects, stands as the perfect example of someone in possession of a traumatized psyche. Hamlet, throughout the play, shows signs of what is today known as "post-traumatic stress" (restlessness, depression, manic episodes, hallucinations, moodiness, emotional outbursts, intellectual and spiritual doubt, etc.) as a result of his father's sudden death, his mother's abrupt remarriage to his uncle, and his visitation from his father's dead spirit. Hamlet not only exhibits signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress but attempts to reconcile and overcome his trauma(s) by offering a testimony to his friends, enemies, and audience as to the nature of his trauma. This particular theoretical approach serves to offer a deeper understanding not only of Hamlet's psychological motivations but also Shakespeare's understanding of human psychology. A trauma theorist might also take an interest in the character of Ophelia, and argue that she also suffers from post-traumatic stress, but unlike Hamlet is unable due to her social and cultural position as a woman to locate someone who can bear witness to her own post-traumatic testimony and allow her to begin to reconcile herself to her new traumatic awareness.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What is the critical purpose and goal of trauma theory?
2. What is the purpose of testimony according to trauma theorists?

### **Arguments against Theory**

Though literary theory has, in many respects, become a widely accepted critical practice throughout most literature and humanities departments in North America and Europe, there are still a number of literary critics, academics, and writers who dismiss the validity of literary theory as a mode of critical textual interpretation. The main complaint that is issued against literary theory is that the theories themselves—especially those which stem from Post-structuralism and the deconstructionist theories of Derrida—are often quite difficult to understand and tend to depend upon specialized and esoteric knowledge in order to be properly understood by readers and made use of by critics. These detractors feel that the relative difficulty and complexity of most literary theories render the practice of literary theory applicable only to those who have the means and ability to take the time to learn the various components of the theories themselves. These detractors also sometimes argue that literary theory has little practical application outside of academia and, thus, does not help to truly bring a greater understanding of the social, political, and cultural aspects of literary texts to the public. Other theory detractors argue that literary theory is often guided by a decidedly leftist and liberal ideology and hence is usually politically biased. They argue that the practice of literary



theory serves ultimately not to promote a greater understanding of literary texts but to promote a decidedly anti-capitalistic political agenda rather than an apolitical understanding and appreciation of literary texts. Other anti-theorists argue that theoretical approaches to literature delineate the ultimate value and meaning of literary texts by ascribing rather specific and limited readings and interpretations to particular aspects of them and, in effect, resist any sort of holistic vision or reading of texts from being developed. Many creative writers tend to dismiss literary theory for imposing ideas and interpretations upon their texts which often have little to do with their own artistic intentions or range of knowledge.

Many other readers, critics, and academics argue that literary theory has a measure of validity to it and can serve to unveil aspects of literary texts that other critical methods cannot. They often caution, though, that literary theory should not be employed to offer totalizing readings and interpretations of literary texts. They argue that while a text, such as *Hamlet*, might have further dimensions and possible meanings of it revealed by the application of literary theory, a theoretical interpretation of the play—no matter how detailed and sweeping that interpretation might—will not serve to offer a complete interpretation of the play, given that a theoretical approach will always concentrate upon particular aspects of the text and neglect other aspects of it. Furthermore, literary texts are rarely written with the principles attached to a given theory in mind, hence a theory that is introduced into a critical interpretation of a text always comes from outside of the text itself and is not an intrinsic part of the text itself; hence, it cannot serve to offer a complete interpretation of a text in terms of the author's vision. In the case of *Hamlet*—and most every other literary text ever composed—a literary theory that is applied to a study of the play will always be introducing a set of ideas that exist apart from (and which were probably developed long after the writing of) the play itself, hence they will reflect the attitudes and mindset of the theorist more so than Shakespeare himself. In the view of some academics and critics, this renders a theoretical interpretation of a work such as *Hamlet* rather limited in terms of its ability to fully grasp Shakespeare's vision of the play.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What are the main arguments that have been raised against the application of literary theory?
2. What do some critics consider to be the central fault in textual interpretations which make use of literary theory?



## Glossary of Literary Theory Terms

**Allegory:** a narrative in which the surface story serves as a reflection of at least another layer of meaning

**Allusion:** a reference within a literary work to some place, person, or event outside of the text itself

**Analogy:** a comparison based on a similarity between two things

**Carnival:** the literary subversion of authority, rules, and normal culture

**Criticism:** the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary texts

**Deconstruction:** a form of literary and critical theory that focuses on the contradictions in language and interpretation and offers a critique of the intellectual assumptions that underlie Western thought

**Desire:** a psychological process that originates in the need to see oneself reflected within another and have that recognition be returned, something which the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan felt to be inherent in all people and impossible to be fulfilled

**Eco-criticism/Eco-theory:** an approach to literature which focuses on environmental issues

**Epistemology:** the study of knowledge, particularly what it means to possess knowledge and the manners through which knowledge is acquired

**Feminist criticism/feminist theory:** the study of literature through the perspective of women and women's issues

**Fiction:** a narrative that is not factual but, instead, imagined or invented

**Formalism:** an approach to the study of literature which analyzes the internal features (rather than external historical, social, or biographical factors) of a literary text

**Frankfurt school:** a group of German intellectuals who were associated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in the 1920s; the Frankfurt school is known for its advent of "critical theory," a Marxist analysis of society.

**Gender:** a synonym for the performance of one's sex; literary theorists, however, identify sex as biological and gender as a social and cultural production and the various norms and standards associated with such.





**Hegemony:** the manner through which a dominant class gains and maintains its social, political, and cultural power

**Hermeneutics:** the examination of the interpretation of literary texts

**Ideology:** a system of political, cultural, social, or religious belief

**Imitation:** the principle that art serves to imitate reality

**Implied author/reader:** the “implied author” is the author’s other self, the author who exists as the creative presence behind a narrative; the “real author” or “external author” is the person who wrote the narrative and does not reside within the world of the narrative. The “implied reader” is the hypothetical reader (imagined by the author) who works with the implied author to complete the narrative. The “real reader” is the reader actually reading the text.

**Interpretation:** the process by which a reader, critic or theorist construes or constructs the meaning(s) of a literary text

**Intertextuality:** the rejection of a text as an autonomous entity created by a singular author; references, both direct and implicit, to other texts within a text

**Irony:** the act of implying something very different from what is being stated; the capacity for poetic language to reconcile opposing ideas

**Linguistics:** the scientific study of language

**Marxist theory:** a form of literary theory that focuses on understanding literature through and in relation to the determining forces of a society, such as history, economics, ideology, and class.

**Metaphor:** a figure of speech in which something is identified and compared by something else

**Motif:** an element that appears in a variety of different literary works

**Multiculturalism:** a movement that assumes that mainstream culture has overlooked or oppressed the contributions of minority groups and which seeks to bring those contributions to light

**Myth:** a culture’s various stories which recount spectacular or supernatural events that reflect that culture’s view of the world

**Narratee:** the figure to whom a story is told

**Narrative:** an account of factual or fictional events told by a narrator



**Narratology:** the systematic study of narratives

**Narrator:** the voice that recounts a story

**Negative capability:** a writer's capacity to negate him or herself in order to enter into or become one with his or her subject

**New Criticism:** a type of criticism developed in the 1920s and 1930s that asserted that the meaning of a literary work could be found not in the intention of the author or experience of the reader, but within the text itself by paying close attention to the characteristics of the work through close reading

**New Historicism:** a form of literary theory that examines a literary text as participating in the historical processes that it "reconceives" and pays close attention to historicity of the text and the textual nature of history itself

**Novel:** a book-length fictional narrative written in prose

**Ontology:** the study of being

**Orientalism:** the Western perception of Eastern cultures

**Other:** a term used to describe traditional (usually subjective) attitudes toward marginalized people

**Patriarchy:** a social system controlled by men

**Phallogocentric:** a mode of thinking that locates the source of social, political, cultural, and personal power in men

**Phenomenology:** a method from the field of philosophy that describes objects as they are registered and understood in the consciousness of an observer

**Philology:** the historical study of language

**Platonism:** ideas developed by Plato; the central doctrine is a belief that the world that is ordinarily experienced in but an imitation of actual reality.

**Postcolonial theory:** a form of literary and cultural theory which examines the impact of European cultures on their former colonies

**Post-structuralism:** an intellectual movement which asserts that meaning cannot be determined since any text can be interpreted in various, conflicting ways

**Psychoanalytical theory:** a mode of literary theory that focuses on the subconscious aspects of the artistic process



**Queer theory:** a mode of literary theory which focuses on how alternative forms of sexuality are depicted in literature

**Reader response theory:** a theoretical movement that focuses on the notion that a literary work's meaning is created within the mind of the reader

**Readerly/writerly texts:** a “readerly text” is a conventional narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end. A “writerly text” is a narrative which asks the reader to help produce its meaning.

**Russian formalism:** a group of critics and theorists who concentrated on the distinction between languages as it is used in literature and how it is ordinarily used

**Semiotics/Semiology:** the study of signs

**Signifier/Signified:** the two components of a linguistic sign. The “signifier” is the way the word sounds or looks. The “signified” is the concept or meaning the world represents.

**Sign:** any verbal or non-verbal element that represents something

**Theory:** the examination of basic critical principles from a variety of possible different intellectual perspectives

