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 19th 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 20th 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 20th 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

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?

Application in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Hamlet, in many respects, serves as the perfect example of the Carnivalesque, 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 Carnivalesque 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 19th 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 19th 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