Critical Theory

Marxist ways of reading

As you already know, writers like Priestley present ideas from a specific political perspective: one which focuses on the struggles between social classes and the struggles between those who oppress and those who are oppressed and between those who have power and those who do not. This particular way of reading literature is based on the theories of Karl Marx who believed that Western capitalist economic systems were designed to increase the wealth of the rich, while oppressing and suppressing the poor. Marxist critics tend to believe that literature is the product of the writer's own class and cultural values and that literary texts are themselves products of a particular ideology. The Marxist critic is a reader who keeps in mind issues of power, work, oppression and money, and in focusing on what the text reveals of the author's values and social context, Marxism questions whether the text supports the prevailing social and economic system or undermines it.

The politics of class: Marxism

Taken from Literary Theory: The Basics, by H. Bertens:

To discuss Marxism in the early twenty-first century may well seem strangely beside the point. After all, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, one self-proclaimed Marxist regime after the other has been forced to consign itself to oblivion. And the officially Marxist political parties that for a long time were a serious force in Western Europe have either disappeared or have become politically marginal. However, Marxism as an intellectual perspective still provides a wholesome counterbalance to our propensity to see ourselves and the writers that we read as completely divorced from socio-economic circumstances. It also counterbalances the related tendency to read the books and poems we read as originating in an autonomous mental realm, as the free products of free and independent minds.

Marxism's questioning of that freedom is now a good deal less sensational than it was in the 1840s and 1850s when Karl Marx (1818–1883) began to outline what is now called Marxist philosophy, although it is still controversial enough. When he noted, in the 'Foreword' to his 1859 Towards a Critique of Political Economy, that the 'mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life', the Victorian upper class, if aware

of this line of thought, would have been horrified, and certainly by the conclusion that followed: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness'.

What does it mean that the 'mode of production' conditions 'the general process of social, political, and intellectual life'? If people have heard about Marxism they usually know rather vaguely that Marxism is about how your social circumstances determine much, if not all, of your life. This seems reasonable enough. If you work the night shift in your local McDonald's, for instance, you are unlikely to fly business class to New York City for a week in the Waldorf Astoria or to bid on the next Rembrandt for sale. But this sort of determinism is perfectly compatible with the idea that we are essentially free. Certain politicians would tell you to get out of the night shift, to get an education, to get rid of your provincial accent, to buy the right outfit, and to start exuding self-confidence. In other words, you have options, like everybody else, and all you have to do is to make the right choices and start moving up that social ladder.

This is not what Marx had in mind. Marxist theory argues that the way we think and the way we experience the world around us are either wholly or largely conditioned by the way the economy is organised. Under a medieval, feudal regime people will have thought and felt different from the way that we think and feel now, in a capitalist economy – that is, an economy in which goods are produced (the 'mode of production') by large concentrations of capital (old-style factories, new-style multinationals) and then sold on a free, competitive market. The base of a society – the way its economy is organised, broadly speaking – determines its superstructure – everything that we might classify as belonging to the realm of culture, again in a broad sense: education, law, but also religion, philosophy, political programmes, and the arts. This implies a view of literature that is completely at odds with the Anglo-American view of literature that goes back to Matthew Arnold. If the way we experience reality and the way we think about it (our religious, political, and philosophical views) are determined by the sort of economy we happen to live in, then clearly there is no such thing as an unchanging human condition. On the contrary, with, for instance, the emergence of capitalism some centuries ago we may expect to find a new experience of reality and new views of the world. Since capitalism did not happen overnight we will not find a clean break but we certainly should find a gradual transition to a new, more or less collective perspective. The term 'collective' is important here. If the economic 'base' indeed determines the cultural 'superstructure', then writers will not have all that much freedom in their creative efforts. They will inevitably work within the framework dictated by the economic 'base' and will

have much in common with other writers living and writing under the same economic dispensation. Traditional Marxism, then, asserts that thought is subservient to, and follows, the material conditions under which it develops. Its outlook is materialist, as opposed to the idealist perspective, whose claim that matter is basically subservient to thought is one of the fundamental assumptions of modern Western culture: we tend to assume that our thinking is free, unaffected by material circumstances. In our minds we can always be free. Wrong, says Marxism, minds aren't free at all, they only think they are.

Capitalism, Marxism tells us, thrives on exploiting its labourers. Simply put, capitalists grow rich and shareholders do well because the labourers that work for them and actually produce goods (including services) get less – and often a good deal less – for their efforts than their labour is actually worth. Labourers have known this for a long time and have organised themselves in labour unions to get fairer deals. What they do not know, however, is how capitalism alienates them from themselves by seeing them in terms of production – as production units, as objects rather than human beings. Capitalism turns people into things, it reifies them. Negotiations about better wages, no matter how successful, do not affect (let alone reverse) that process. Marx saw it clearly at work in his nineteenth-century environment in which men whose grandfathers had still worked as cobblers, cabinetmakers, yeoman farmers, and so on – in other words, as members of self-supporting communities who dealt directly with clients and buyers – performed mechanical tasks in factories where they were merely one link in a long chain. However, this process of reification is not limited to labourers. The capitalist mode of production generates a view of the world – focused on profit – in which ultimately all of us function as objects and become alienated from ourselves.

Bertens, H. (2001) Literary Theory: The Basics, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 81–83.

Feminist ways of reading

While there are many different types of feminist criticism, these notes will see writers who focus on the struggles women face in society and the ways these struggles are reflected and questioned (or not reflected and not questioned) in literature. Texts are read in a way that critically explores the male-centred nature of civilisation and therefore the phallocentric nature of much literature. Feminist critics consider different gender representations within texts but also

question whose voices are heard and whose attitudes and values are assumed within the text. Gender issues are clearly central to those who write about literature through a feminist lens. Texts are often criticised for focusing on male protagonists while women have marginal roles. Feminist critics often reposition the focus and either sympathise with the oppression of women or celebrate the attempts of women to assert themselves. Some feminist critics use ideas from feminist literary criticism to read the text in a way that is counter to the commonly accepted reading.

Feminism

Taken from Literary Theory: The Basics, by H. Bertens:

Most critics now believe that it is impossible to cordon off neatly a given field of interest or study from the rest of the world. For better or for worse, everything seems somehow related to everything else. With regard to the social position of women, and therefore also with regard to the field of female writing, that view is to a large extent due to the feminist movement that began to gain momentum in the course of the 1960s. Paradoxically, even Marxism, with its wide-ranging historical theorising, had largely ignored the position of women. With hindsight, this oversight is all the more incomprehensible since some of its key concepts – the struggle between social classes, the blinding effects of ideology – might have been employed to analyse the social situation of women.

The feminist movement, then, put socio-historical circumstances as a determining factor in the production of literature firmly on the map. Feminism was involved right from the beginning in literary studies, and for good reasons. Kate Millett's trailblazing Sexual Politics of 1970, for instance, devotes long chapters to the attitudes towards women that pervade the work of prominent twentieth-century authors like D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) and Henry Miller (1891–1980). Both were held in high regard by many critics for their daring and liberating depictions of erotic relations. Millett, however, showed that the attitude of their male characters towards women was not so emancipated at all: most of the male characters that she examined – and especially those of Miller – were denigrating, exploitative, and repressive in their relations with women. Feminism saw very clearly that the widespread negative stereotyping of women in literature and film (we can now add rock videos) constituted a formidable obstacle on the road to true equality.

The first type of feminist criticism asks questions of the following kind. What sort of roles did female characters play? With what sort of themes were they associated? What are the implicit presuppositions of a given text with regard to

its readers? (Upon closer inspection many texts clearly assume that their readers are male – just like those commercials in which fast cars are presented by seductive young women.) Feminist critics showed how often literary representations of women repeated familiar cultural stereotypes. Such stereotypes included the woman – fast car or not – as an immoral and dangerous seductress, the woman as eternally dissatisfied shrew, the woman as cute but essentially helpless, the woman as unworldly, self-sacrificing angel, and so on. Much of the research involved naturally focused on the work of male authors, but female writers, too, came under close scrutiny and were regularly found to have succumbed to the lure of stereotypical representations. Since the way female characters were standardly portrayed had not much in common with the way feminist critics saw and experienced themselves, these characters clearly were constructions, put together – not necessarily by the writers who presented them themselves, but by the culture they belonged to – to serve a not-so-hidden purpose: the continued social and cultural domination of males.

If we look at the four examples I have given we see immediately that female independence (in the seductress and the shrew) gets a strongly negative connotation, while helplessness and renouncing all ambition and desire are presented as endearing and admirable. The message is that dependence leads to indulgement and reverence while independence leads to dislike and rejection. The desired effect – of which the writer clearly need not be aware – is a perpetuation of the unequal power relations between men and women.

Bertens, H. (2001) Literary Theory: The Basics, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 94–95 and pp 97–99

Feminism and feminist criticism

Taken from Beginning Theory, by P. Barry:

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'woman's movement' of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense the woman's movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot or spin-off from feminism which is remote from the ultimate aims of the movement, but as one of its most practical ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

The concern with 'conditioning' and 'socialisation' underpins a crucial set of distinctions, that between the terms 'feminist', 'female', and 'feminine'. As Toril Moi explains, the first is 'a political position', the second 'a matter of biology', and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'. Particularly in the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism (see Moi's essay in The Feminist Reader, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore) …

… The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialisation', since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth

century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effect went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. Necessarily, the criticism which undertook this work was combative and polemical. Then, in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. Firstly, feminist criticism became much more eclectic, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism – Marxism, structuralism, linguistics, and so on. Secondly, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. Thirdly, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women's writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were give new prominence.

Such distinct phases of interest and activity seem characteristic of feminist criticism. Elaine Showalter, for instance, described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from 'androtexts' (books by men) to 'gynotexts' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexts, but gynocriticism is a broad and varied field, and any generalisations about it should

be treated with caution. The subjects of gynocriticism are, she says, 'the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition'…

… But feminist criticism since the 1970s has been remarkable for the wide range of positions that exist within it. Debates and disagreements have centred on three particular areas, these being: 1. the role of theory; 2. the nature of language; and 3. the value or otherwise of psychoanalysis.

Barry, P. (2002) Beginning Theory, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 121–123.

What feminist critics do

Taken from Beginning Theory, by P. Barry:

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.

2. Revalue women's experience.

3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.

4. Challenge representations of women as 'Other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature'.

5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.

6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and 'natural'.

7. Raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.

8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an écriture feminine, and whether this is also available to men.

9. 'Re-read' psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.

10. Question the popular notion of the death of the author, asking whether there are only 'subject positions … constructed in discourse', or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g. of a black or lesbian writer) is central.

11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly 'neutral' or 'mainstream' literary interpretations.

Gender

Taken from Literary Theory: The Basics, by H. Bertens:

To put what I have just sketched in somewhat different terms: this type of feminist criticism leads to a thorough examination of gender roles. Gender has to do not with how females (and males) really are, but with the way that a given culture or subculture sees them, how they are culturally constructed. To say that women have two breasts is to say something about their biological nature, to say something about what it is to be a female; to say that women are naturally timid, or sweet, or intuitive, or dependent, or self-pitying, is to construct a role for them. It tells us how the speaker wants to see them. What traditionally has been called 'feminine', then, is a cultural construction, a gender role that has been culturally assigned to countless generations of women. The same holds for masculinity, with its connotations of strength, rationality, stoicism, and self-reliance. Like femininity, traditional masculinity is a gender role that has far less to do with actual males than with the wishful thinking projected onto the heroes of Westerns, hard-boiled private eyes, and British secret agents. Masculinity, too, is a cultural construction. We can see this, for instance, in one of the traditional representations of homosexuality, in which maleness and masculinity are uncoupled. Although homosexuals are male they are often portrayed as feminine, that is as lacking masculinity.

Feminism, then, has been focused right from the beginning on gender because a thorough revision of gender roles seemed the most effective way of changing the power relations between men and women. Since no one in their right mind will want to give serious power to a person who must be timid, dependent, irrational, and self-pitying because she is a woman, the effort to purge the culture of such gendered stereotyping is absolutely crucial. (It is all the more crucial because thinking in terms of gender stereotypes has rather paradoxically brought a good many timid, dependent, irrational, and self-pitying males, whom everybody automatically assumed to be 'masculine', to positions of great and dangerous power.) Feminism has politicised gender – by showing its constructed nature – and put it firmly on the agenda of the later twentieth century. Moreover, after its initial focus on the gendered representation of women (and men) in Western culture, it has very effectively widened the issue and shown how often seemingly neutral references, descriptions, definitions, and so on are in fact gendered, and always according to the same pattern. A masculine gendering is supposed to evoke positive connotations, a feminine gendering is supposed to evoke negative ones. Feminism has shown how this binary

opposition – to use the structuralist term for such pairs – is pervasively present in the way we think about nature, emotion, science, action (or non-action), art, and so on.

Bertens, H. (2001) Literary Theory: The Basics, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 94–95 and pp 97–99.

The following concepts will be entirely new to you for now but you will be well prepared for further advanced study if you are at least aware of these.

Post-colonial ways of reading

Taken from An Introduction to Post-colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial Literature, by C. J. Ruffner Grieneisen:

Where does it come from?

Post-colonial literature comes from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and India. Many post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national identity, allegiance and childhood. What is Post-colonial Theory?

Post-colonial Theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their people as its subject matter. The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance.

Post-colonial Theory became part of the critical toolbox in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit **Edward Said's book Orientalism** as being the founding work. Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. However, attempts at coming up with a single definition of post-colonial theory have proved controversial, and some writers have strongly critiqued the whole concept.

What Post-colonial critics do & Post-colonial criticism: an example

Taken from Beginning Theory, by P. Barry:

What post-colonial critics do:

1. They reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference;

2. They examine the representation of other cultures in literature as a way of achieving this end;

3. They show how such literature is often evasively and crucially silent on matters concerned with colonisation and imperialism (see, for instance, the discussion of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park in the example described below);

4. They foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in relevant literary works;

5. They celebrate hybridity and 'cultural polyvalency', that is, the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture (for instance, that of the coloniser, through a colonial school system, and that of the colonised, through local and oral traditions);

6. They develop a perspective, not just applicable to post-colonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'Otherness' are seen as sources of energy and potential change.

Barry, P. (2002) Beginning Theory, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 198–200.

Ecocritical ways of reading

In this section you will see writers focusing on the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The earth is seen as being central to literary readings, and for many ecocritics this is essentially the only thing worth considering because if we don't have a planet to live on then all other human concerns are pointless. Texts are read in relation to the ecological values they show. The focus might be on whether men and women write about nature and values differently, about how the wildness of nature has been represented over time and how language is used to reveal concerns about the environment.

Ecological criticism sees human culture as being crucially connected to the non-human world and ecocritics believe we ignore that connection at our peril. Ecocriticism is essentially modern and, although it has its roots in the pastoral tradition and Romanticism, it really only gained momentum in the 1990s when scientists began to understand the environmental crisis facing the world. It reflects the concerns of the modern world regarding nature and the environment and directs readers to consider how human beings and their actions impact on the planet. Because ecocriticism has its roots in pastoral writing there are some extracts included here that provide some insights into the pastoral genre and begin to link it to ecocritical concerns. Many of the writers whose work is included in this section also mention literary texts that have been of interest to them and which may provide students and teachers with some ideas about which texts to explore in the light of ecocritical ideas.

5.1 What is Ecocriticism?

Taken from What is Ecocriticism?, by C. Glotfelty:

Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the pilot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs US government reports, and what rhetoric enforces this view? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the

cultural artifacts language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, that "Everything is connected to everything else," we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.

Glotfelty, C. (2014) 'What is Ecocriticism?' The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment [online], available: http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/defining/glotfelty/

5.2 Glossary of terms

Taken from The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism, by L. Coupe:

anthropocentrism the assumption that human life is the central fact of the planet.

anthropomorphism the attribution of human form or personality to nature (as in the 'pathetic fallacy' condemned by John Ruskin).

bioregion a natural region, exhibiting both stability and diversity, which is defined by its ecological coherence.

biosphere in its modest, neutral sense, the collective name for all the areas of the earth in which life is found; in its more ambitious, positive sense, the planet and its physical environment as forming one living whole (as in James Lovelock's 'Gaia' hypothesis).

deep ecology a radical form of ecology which challenges anthropocentrism and which insists that human beings must subordinate their interests to those of the planet.

ecocriticism the most important branch of green studies, which considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts

and which theorises about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction.

ecofeminism a movement which resists both the domination of nature by humanity and the domination of women by men, exploring the connection between the two processes and seeking a new relationship between woman, man and nature.

ecology a branch of biology concerned with the relation between living things and their environment; the study of the earth as our home or 'household' (Greek, oikos).

ecosystem the web of connections linking all the animals and plants in a particular environment.

environment in general, the physical and biological system which supports life; in particular, the surroundings in which living creatures find themselves.

environmentalism by contrast with 'deep ecology', the belief that the natural world can be 'managed' for the benefit of humanity while causing as little damage to the biosphere as possible within the existing culture – nature relationship.

green studies an emerging academic movement which seeks to ensure that nature is given as much attention within the humanities as is currently given to gender, class and race.

industrialism the term used by Andrew Dobson in his Green Political Thought for the whole political system which is opposed by what he calls 'ecologism'.

nature the physical, non-human environment including wildlife and wilderness, flora and fauna, and so on; but also the 'essence' of anything, including humanity, in which case it is often spelt with a capital N and should be used with caution.

pastoral a literary convention which associates the country with innocence and the court or city with corruption; any literary work contrasting rural and urban life.

Coupe, L. (2000) The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 302–303.

Writing the wilderness

Taken from The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism, by L. Coupe.