

# Literary Theory

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“Literary theory” is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean. Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature. All literary interpretation draws on a basis in theory but can serve as a justification for very different kinds of critical activity. It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of their thematic presence within texts. Literary theory offers varying approaches for understanding the role of historical context in interpretation as well as the relevance of linguistic and unconscious elements of the text. Literary theorists trace the history and evolution of the different genres—narrative, dramatic, lyric—in addition to the more recent emergence of the novel and the short story, while also investigating the importance of formal elements of literary structure. Lastly, literary theory in recent years has sought to explain the degree to which the text is more the product of a culture than an individual author and in turn how those texts help to create the culture.

## 1. What Is Literary Theory?

“Literary theory,” sometimes designated “critical theory,” or “theory,” and now undergoing a transformation into “cultural theory” within the discipline of literary studies, can be understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts. Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations. All critical practice regarding literature depends on an underlying structure of ideas in at least two ways: theory provides a rationale for what constitutes the subject matter of criticism—“the literary”—and the specific aims of critical practice—the act of interpretation itself. For example, to speak of the “unity” of *Oedipus the King* explicitly invokes Aristotle’s theoretical statements on poetics. To argue, as does Chinua Achebe, that Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* fails to grant full humanity to the Africans it depicts is a perspective informed by a postcolonial literary theory that presupposes a history of exploitation and racism. Critics that explain the climactic drowning of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* as a suicide generally call upon a supporting architecture of feminist and gender theory. The structure of ideas that enables criticism of a literary work may or may not be acknowledged by the critic, and the status of literary theory within the academic discipline of literary studies continues to evolve.

Literary theory and the formal practice of literary interpretation runs a parallel but less well known course with the history of philosophy and is evident in the historical record at least as far back as Plato. *The Cratylus* contains a Plato’s meditation on the relationship of words and the things to which they refer. Plato’s skepticism about signification, i.e., that words bear no etymological relationship to their meanings but are arbitrarily “imposed,” becomes a central

concern in the twentieth century to both “Structuralism” and “Poststructuralism.” However, a persistent belief in “reference,” the notion that words and images refer to an objective reality, has provided epistemological (that is, having to do with theories of knowledge) support for theories of literary representation throughout most of Western history. Until the nineteenth century, Art, in Shakespeare’s phrase, held “a mirror up to nature” and faithfully recorded an objectively real world independent of the observer.

Modern literary theory gradually emerges in Europe during the nineteenth century. In one of the earliest developments of literary theory, German “higher criticism” subjected biblical texts to a radical historicizing that broke with traditional scriptural interpretation. “Higher,” or “source criticism,” analyzed biblical tales in light of comparable narratives from other cultures, an approach that anticipated some of the method and spirit of twentieth century theory, particularly “Structuralism” and “New Historicism.” In France, the eminent literary critic Charles Augustin Saint Beuve maintained that a work of literature could be explained entirely in terms of biography, while novelist Marcel Proust devoted his life to refuting Saint Beuve in a massive narrative in which he contended that the details of the life of the artist are utterly transformed in the work of art. (This dispute was taken up anew by the French theorist Roland Barthes in his famous declaration of the “Death of the Author.” See “Structuralism” and “Poststructuralism.”) Perhaps the greatest nineteenth century influence on literary theory came from the deep epistemological suspicion of Friedrich Nietzsche: that facts are not facts until they have been interpreted. Nietzsche’s critique of knowledge has had a profound impact on literary studies and helped usher in an era of intense literary theorizing that has yet to pass.

Attention to the etymology of the term “theory,” from the Greek “theoria,” alerts us to the partial nature of theoretical approaches to literature. “Theoria” indicates a view or perspective of the Greek stage. This is precisely what literary theory offers, though specific theories often claim to present a complete system for understanding literature. The current state of theory is such that there are many overlapping areas of influence, and older schools of theory, though no longer enjoying their previous eminence, continue to exert an influence on the whole. The once widely-held conviction (an implicit theory) that literature is a repository of all that is meaningful and ennobling in the human experience, a view championed by the Leavis School in Britain, may no longer be acknowledged by name but remains an essential justification for the current structure of American universities and liberal arts curricula. The moment of “Deconstruction” may have passed, but its emphasis on the indeterminacy of signs (that we are unable to establish exclusively what a word means when used in a given situation) and thus of texts, remains significant. Many critics may not embrace the label “feminist,” but the premise that gender is a social construct, one of theoretical feminisms distinguishing insights, is now axiomatic in a number of theoretical perspectives.

While literary theory has always implied or directly expressed a conception of the world outside the text, in the twentieth century three movements—“Marxist theory” of the Frankfurt School, “Feminism,” and “Postmodernism”—have opened the field of literary studies into a broader area of inquiry. Marxist approaches to literature require an understanding of the primary economic and social bases of culture since Marxist aesthetic theory sees the work of art as a product, directly or indirectly, of the base structure of society. Feminist thought and practice analyzes the production of literature and literary representation within the framework that includes all social and cultural formations as they pertain to the role of women in history. Postmodern thought consists of both aesthetic and epistemological strands. Postmodernism in art has included a move toward non-referential, non-linear, abstract forms; a heightened degree of self-referentiality; and the collapse of categories and conventions that had

traditionally governed art. Postmodern thought has led to the serious questioning of the so-called metanarratives of history, science, philosophy, and economic and sexual reproduction. Under postmodernity, all knowledge comes to be seen as “constructed” within historical self-contained systems of understanding. Marxist, feminist, and postmodern thought have brought about the incorporation of all human discourses (that is, interlocking fields of language and knowledge) as a subject matter for analysis by the literary theorist. Using the various poststructuralist and postmodern theories that often draw on disciplines other than the literary—linguistic, anthropological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical—for their primary insights, literary theory has become an interdisciplinary body of cultural theory. Taking as its premise that human societies and knowledge consist of texts in one form or another, cultural theory (for better or worse) is now applied to the varieties of texts, ambitiously undertaking to become the preeminent model of inquiry into the human condition.

Literary theory is a site of theories: some theories, like “Queer Theory,” are “in;” other literary theories, like “Deconstruction,” are “out” but continue to exert an influence on the field. “Traditional literary criticism,” “New Criticism,” and “Structuralism” are alike in that they held to the view that the study of literature has an objective body of knowledge under its scrutiny. The other schools of literary theory, to varying degrees, embrace a postmodern view of language and reality that calls into serious question the objective referent of literary studies. The following categories are certainly not exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive, but they represent the major trends in literary theory of this century.

## **2. Traditional Literary Criticism**

Academic literary criticism prior to the rise of “New Criticism” in the United States tended to practice traditional literary history: tracking influence, establishing the canon of major writers in the literary periods, and clarifying historical context and allusions within the text. Literary biography was and still is an important interpretive method in and out of the academy; versions of moral criticism, not unlike the Leavis School in Britain, and aesthetic (e.g. genre studies) criticism were also generally influential literary practices. Perhaps the key unifying feature of traditional literary criticism was the consensus within the academy as to the both the literary canon (that is, the books all educated persons should read) and the aims and purposes of literature. What literature was, and why we read literature, and what we read, were questions that subsequent movements in literary theory were to raise.

## **3. Formalism and New Criticism**

“Formalism” is, as the name implies, an interpretive approach that emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text. The work of the Formalists had a general impact on later developments in “Structuralism” and other theories of narrative. “Formalism,” like “Structuralism,” sought to place the study of literature on a scientific basis through objective analysis of the motifs, devices, techniques, and other “functions” that comprise the literary work. The Formalists placed great importance on the literariness of texts, those qualities that distinguished the literary from other kinds of writing. Neither author nor context was essential for the Formalists; it was the narrative that spoke, the “hero-function,” for example, that had meaning. Form was the content. A plot device or narrative strategy was examined for how it functioned and compared to how it had functioned in other literary works. Of the Russian Formalist critics, Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky are probably the most well known.

The Formalist adage that the purpose of literature was “to make the stones stonier” nicely expresses their notion of literariness. “Formalism” is perhaps best known is Shklovsky’s concept of “defamiliarization.” The routine of ordinary experience, Shklovsky contended, rendered invisible the uniqueness and particularity of the objects of existence. Literary language, partly by calling attention to itself as language, estranged the reader from the familiar and made fresh the experience of daily life.

The “New Criticism,” so designated as to indicate a break with traditional methods, was a product of the American university in the 1930s and 40s. “New Criticism” stressed close reading of the text itself, much like the French pedagogical precept “explication du texte.” As a strategy of reading, “New Criticism” viewed the work of literature as an aesthetic object independent of historical context and as a unified whole that reflected the unified sensibility of the artist. T.S. Eliot, though not explicitly associated with the movement, expressed a similar critical-aesthetic philosophy in his essays on John Donne and the metaphysical poets, writers who Eliot believed experienced a complete integration of thought and feeling. New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and W.K. Wimsatt placed a similar focus on the metaphysical poets and poetry in general, a genre well suited to New Critical practice. “New Criticism” aimed at bringing a greater intellectual rigor to literary studies, confining itself to careful scrutiny of the text alone and the formal structures of paradox, ambiguity, irony, and metaphor, among others. “New Criticism” was fired by the conviction that their readings of poetry would yield a humanizing influence on readers and thus counter the alienating tendencies of modern, industrial life. “New Criticism” in this regard bears an affinity to the Southern Agrarian movement whose manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, contained essays by two New Critics, Ransom and Warren. Perhaps the enduring legacy of “New Criticism” can be found in the college classroom, in which the verbal texture of the poem on the page remains a primary object of literary study.

#### **4. Marxism and Critical Theory**

Marxist literary theories tend to focus on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinctions through the medium of literature. Marxist theorists use traditional techniques of literary analysis but subordinate aesthetic concerns to the final social and political meanings of literature. Marxist theorist often champion authors sympathetic to the working classes and authors whose work challenges economic equalities found in capitalist societies. In keeping with the totalizing spirit of Marxism, literary theories arising from the Marxist paradigm have not only sought new ways of understanding the relationship between economic production and literature, but all cultural production as well. Marxist analyses of society and history have had a profound effect on literary theory and practical criticism, most notably in the development of “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism.”

The Hungarian theorist Georg Lukacs contributed to an understanding of the relationship between historical materialism and literary form, in particular with realism and the historical novel. Walter Benjamin broke new ground in his work in his study of aesthetics and the reproduction of the work of art. The Frankfurt School of philosophers, including most notably Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse—after their emigration to the United States—played a key role in introducing Marxist assessments of culture into the mainstream of American academic life. These thinkers became associated with what is known as “Critical theory,” one of the constituent components of which was a critique of the instrumental use of reason in advanced capitalist culture. “Critical theory” held to a distinction between the high cultural heritage of Europe and the mass culture produced by

capitalist societies as an instrument of domination. “Critical theory” sees in the structure of mass cultural forms—jazz, Hollywood film, advertising—a replication of the structure of the factory and the workplace. Creativity and cultural production in advanced capitalist societies were always already co-opted by the entertainment needs of an economic system that requires sensory stimulation and recognizable cliché and suppressed the tendency for sustained deliberation.

The major Marxist influences on literary theory since the Frankfurt School have been Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton in Great Britain and Frank Lentricchia and Fredric Jameson in the United States. Williams is associated with the New Left political movement in Great Britain and the development of “Cultural Materialism” and the Cultural Studies Movement, originating in the 1960s at Birmingham University’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Eagleton is known both as a Marxist theorist and as a popularizer of theory by means of his widely read overview, *Literary Theory*. Lentricchia likewise became influential through his account of trends in theory, *After the New Criticism*. Jameson is a more diverse theorist, known both for his impact on Marxist theories of culture and for his position as one of the leading figures in theoretical postmodernism. Jameson’s work on consumer culture, architecture, film, literature and other areas, typifies the collapse of disciplinary boundaries taking place in the realm of Marxist and postmodern cultural theory. Jameson’s work investigates the way the structural features of late capitalism—particularly the transformation of all culture into commodity form—are now deeply embedded in all of our ways of communicating.

## 5. Structuralism and Poststructuralism

Like the “New Criticism,” “Structuralism” sought to bring to literary studies a set of objective criteria for analysis and a new intellectual rigor. “Structuralism” can be viewed as an extension of “Formalism” in that both “Structuralism” and “Formalism” devoted their attention to matters of literary form (i.e. structure) rather than social or historical content; and that both bodies of thought were intended to put the study of literature on a scientific, objective basis. “Structuralism” relied initially on the ideas of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Like Plato, Saussure regarded the signifier (words, marks, symbols) as arbitrary and unrelated to the concept, the signified, to which it referred. Within the way a particular society uses language and signs, meaning was constituted by a system of “differences” between units of the language. Particular meanings were of less interest than the underlying structures of signification that made meaning itself possible, often expressed as an emphasis on “langue” rather than “parole.” “Structuralism” was to be a metalanguage, a language about languages, used to decode actual languages, or systems of signification. The work of the “Formalist” Roman Jakobson contributed to “Structuralist” thought, and the more prominent Structuralists included Claude Levi-Strauss in anthropology, Tzvetan Todorov, A.J. Greimas, Gerard Genette, and Barthes.

The philosopher Roland Barthes proved to be a key figure on the divide between “Structuralism” and “Poststructuralism.” “Poststructuralism” is less unified as a theoretical movement than its precursor; indeed, the work of its advocates known by the term “Deconstruction” calls into question the possibility of the coherence of discourse, or the capacity for language to communicate. “Deconstruction,” Semiotic theory (a study of signs with close connections to “Structuralism,” “Reader response theory” in America (“Reception theory” in Europe), and “Gender theory” informed by the psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva are areas of inquiry that can be located under the banner of “Poststructuralism.”

If signifier and signified are both cultural concepts, as they are in “Poststructuralism,” reference to an empirically certifiable reality is no longer guaranteed by language. “Deconstruction” argues that this loss of reference causes an endless deferral of meaning, a system of differences between units of language that has no resting place or final signifier that would enable the other signifiers to hold their meaning. The most important theorist of “Deconstruction,” Jacques Derrida, has asserted, “There is no getting outside text,” indicating a kind of free play of signification in which no fixed, stable meaning is possible. “Poststructuralism” in America was originally identified with a group of Yale academics, the Yale School of “Deconstruction:” J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Paul de Man. Other tendencies in the moment after “Deconstruction” that share some of the intellectual tendencies of “Poststructuralism” would include the “Reader response” theories of Stanley Fish, Jane Tompkins, and Wolfgang Iser.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, an updating of the work of Sigmund Freud, extends “Poststructuralism” to the human subject with further consequences for literary theory. According to Lacan, the fixed, stable self is a Romantic fiction; like the text in “Deconstruction,” the self is a decentered mass of traces left by our encounter with signs, visual symbols, language, etc. For Lacan, the self is constituted by language, a language that is never one’s own, always another’s, always already in use. Barthes applies these currents of thought in his famous declaration of the “death” of the Author: “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” while also applying a similar “Poststructuralist” view to the Reader: “the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.”

Michel Foucault is another philosopher, like Barthes, whose ideas inform much of poststructuralist literary theory. Foucault played a critical role in the development of the postmodern perspective that knowledge is constructed in concrete historical situations in the form of discourse; knowledge is not communicated by discourse but is discourse itself, can only be encountered textually. Following Nietzsche, Foucault performs what he calls “genealogies,” attempts at deconstructing the unacknowledged operation of power and knowledge to reveal the ideologies that make domination of one group by another seem “natural.” Foucauldian investigations of discourse and power were to provide much of the intellectual impetus for a new way of looking at history and doing textual studies that came to be known as the “New Historicism.”

## **6. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism**

“New Historicism,” a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt, designates a body of theoretical and interpretive practices that began largely with the study of early modern literature in the United States. “New Historicism” in America had been somewhat anticipated by the theorists of “Cultural Materialism” in Britain, which, in the words of their leading advocate, Raymond Williams describes “the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production.” Both “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” seek to understand literary texts historically and reject the formalizing influence of previous literary studies, including “New Criticism,” “Structuralism” and “Deconstruction,” all of which in varying ways privilege the literary text and place only secondary emphasis on historical and social context. According to “New Historicism,” the circulation of literary and non-literary texts produces relations of social power within a culture. New Historicist thought differs from traditional historicism in literary studies in several crucial ways. Rejecting traditional historicism’s premise of neutral inquiry, “New

Historicism” accepts the necessity of making historical value judgments. According to “New Historicism,” we can only know the textual history of the past because it is “embedded,” a key term, in the textuality of the present and its concerns. Text and context are less clearly distinct in New Historicist practice. Traditional separations of literary and non-literary texts, “great” literature and popular literature, are also fundamentally challenged. For the “New Historicist,” all acts of expression are embedded in the material conditions of a culture. Texts are examined with an eye for how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion. Like much of the emergent European social history of the 1980s, “New Historicism” takes particular interest in representations of marginal/marginalized groups and non-normative behaviors—witchcraft, cross-dressing, peasant revolts, and exorcisms—as exemplary of the need for power to represent subversive alternatives, the Other, to legitimize itself.

Louis Montrose, another major innovator and exponent of “New Historicism,” describes a fundamental axiom of the movement as an intellectual belief in “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts.” “New Historicism” draws on the work of Levi-Strauss, in particular his notion of culture as a “self-regulating system.” The Foucauldian premise that power is ubiquitous and cannot be equated with state or economic power and Gramsci’s conception of “hegemony,” i.e., that domination is often achieved through culturally-orchestrated consent rather than force, are critical underpinnings to the “New Historicist” perspective. The translation of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival coincided with the rise of the “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” and left a legacy in work of other theorists of influence like Peter Stallybrass and Jonathan Dollimore. In its period of ascendancy during the 1980s, “New Historicism” drew criticism from the political left for its depiction of counter-cultural expression as always co-opted by the dominant discourses. Equally, “New Historicism’s” lack of emphasis on “literariness” and formal literary concerns brought disdain from traditional literary scholars. However, “New Historicism” continues to exercise a major influence in the humanities and in the extended conception of literary studies.

## **7. Ethnic Studies and Postcolonial Criticism**

“Ethnic Studies,” sometimes referred to as “Minority Studies,” has an obvious historical relationship with “Postcolonial Criticism” in that Euro-American imperialism and colonization in the last four centuries, whether external (empire) or internal (slavery) has been directed at recognizable ethnic groups: African and African-American, Chinese, the subaltern peoples of India, Irish, Latino, Native American, and Philipino, among others. “Ethnic Studies” concerns itself generally with art and literature produced by identifiable ethnic groups either marginalized or in a subordinate position to a dominant culture. “Postcolonial Criticism” investigates the relationships between colonizers and colonized in the period post-colonization. Though the two fields are increasingly finding points of intersection—the work of bell hooks, for example—and are both activist intellectual enterprises, “Ethnic Studies and “Postcolonial Criticism” have significant differences in their history and ideas.

“Ethnic Studies” has had a considerable impact on literary studies in the United States and Britain. In W.E.B. Dubois, we find an early attempt to theorize the position of African-Americans within dominant white culture through his concept of “double consciousness,” a dual identity including both “American” and “Negro.” Dubois and theorists after him seek an understanding of how that double experience both creates identity and reveals itself in culture. Afro-Caribbean and African writers—Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe—have made significant early contributions to the theory and practice of ethnic criticism that explores

the traditions, sometimes suppressed or underground, of ethnic literary activity while providing a critique of representations of ethnic identity as found within the majority culture. Ethnic and minority literary theory emphasizes the relationship of cultural identity to individual identity in historical circumstances of overt racial oppression. More recently, scholars and writers such as Henry Louis Gates, Toni Morrison, and Kwame Anthony Appiah have brought attention to the problems inherent in applying theoretical models derived from Euro-centric paradigms (that is, structures of thought) to minority works of literature while at the same time exploring new interpretive strategies for understanding the vernacular (common speech) traditions of racial groups that have been historically marginalized by dominant cultures.

Though not the first writer to explore the historical condition of postcolonialism, the Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is generally regarded as having inaugurated the field of explicitly "Postcolonial Criticism" in the West. Said argues that the concept of "the Orient" was produced by the "imaginative geography" of Western scholarship and has been instrumental in the colonization and domination of non-Western societies. "Postcolonial" theory reverses the historical center/margin direction of cultural inquiry: critiques of the metropolis and capital now emanate from the former colonies. Moreover, theorists like Homi K. Bhabha have questioned the binary thought that produces the dichotomies—center/margin, white/black, and colonizer/colonized—by which colonial practices are justified. The work of Gayatri C. Spivak has focused attention on the question of who speaks for the colonial "Other" and the relation of the ownership of discourse and representation to the development of the postcolonial subjectivity. Like feminist and ethnic theory, "Postcolonial Criticism" pursues not merely the inclusion of the marginalized literature of colonial peoples into the dominant canon and discourse. "Postcolonial Criticism" offers a fundamental critique of the ideology of colonial domination and at the same time seeks to undo the "imaginative geography" of Orientalist thought that produced conceptual as well as economic divides between West and East, civilized and uncivilized, First and Third Worlds. In this respect, "Postcolonial Criticism" is activist and adversarial in its basic aims. Postcolonial theory has brought fresh perspectives to the role of colonial peoples—their wealth, labor, and culture—in the development of modern European nation states. While "Postcolonial Criticism" emerged in the historical moment following the collapse of the modern colonial empires, the increasing globalization of culture, including the neo-colonialism of multinational capitalism, suggests a continued relevance for this field of inquiry.

## **8. Gender Studies and Queer Theory**

Gender theory came to the forefront of the theoretical scene first as feminist theory but has subsequently come to include the investigation of all gender and sexual categories and identities. Feminist gender theory followed slightly behind the reemergence of political feminism in the United States and Western Europe during the 1960s. Political feminism of the so-called "second wave" had as its emphasis practical concerns with the rights of women in contemporary societies, women's identity, and the representation of women in media and culture. These causes converged with early literary feminist practice, characterized by Elaine Showalter as "gynocriticism," which emphasized the study and canonical inclusion of works by female authors as well as the depiction of women in male-authored canonical texts.

Feminist gender theory is postmodern in that it challenges the paradigms and intellectual premises of western thought, but also takes an activist stance by proposing frequent



interventions and alternative epistemological positions meant to change the social order. In the context of postmodernism, gender theorists, led by the work of Judith Butler, initially viewed the category of “gender” as a human construct enacted by a vast repetition of social performance. The biological distinction between man and woman eventually came under the same scrutiny by theorists who reached a similar conclusion: the sexual categories are products of culture and as such help create social reality rather than simply reflect it. Gender theory achieved a wide readership and acquired much its initial theoretical rigor through the work of a group of French feminist theorists that included Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, who while Bulgarian rather than French, made her mark writing in French. French feminist thought is based on the assumption that the Western philosophical tradition represses the experience of women in the structure of its ideas. As an important consequence of this systematic intellectual repression and exclusion, women’s lives and bodies in historical societies are subject to repression as well. In the creative/critical work of Cixous, we find the history of Western thought depicted as binary oppositions: “speech/writing; Nature/Art, Nature/History, Nature/Mind, Passion/Action.” For Cixous, and for Irigaray as well, these binaries are less a function of any objective reality they describe than the male-dominated discourse of the Western tradition that produced them. Their work beyond the descriptive stage becomes an intervention in the history of theoretical discourse, an attempt to alter the existing categories and systems of thought that found Western rationality. French feminism, and perhaps all feminism after Beauvoir, has been in conversation with the psychoanalytic revision of Freud in the work of Jacques Lacan. Kristeva’s work draws heavily on Lacan. Two concepts from Kristeva—the “semiotic” and “abjection”—have had a significant influence on literary theory. Kristeva’s “semiotic” refers to the gaps, silences, spaces, and bodily presence within the language/symbol system of a culture in which there might be a space for a women’s language, different in kind as it would be from male-dominated discourse.

Masculine gender theory as a separate enterprise has focused largely on social, literary, and historical accounts of the construction of male gender identities. Such work generally lacks feminisms’ activist stance and tends to serve primarily as an indictment rather than a validation of male gender practices and masculinity. The so-called “Men’s Movement,” inspired by the work of Robert Bly among others, was more practical than theoretical and has had only limited impact on gender discourse. The impetus for the “Men’s Movement” came largely as a response to the critique of masculinity and male domination that runs throughout feminism and the upheaval of the 1960s, a period of crisis in American social ideology that has required a reconsideration of gender roles. Having long served as the de facto “subject” of Western thought, male identity and masculine gender theory awaits serious investigation as a particular, and no longer universally representative, field of inquiry.

Much of what theoretical energy of masculine gender theory currently possesses comes from its ambiguous relationship with the field of “Queer theory.” “Queer theory” is not synonymous with gender theory, nor even with the overlapping fields of gay and lesbian studies, but does share many of their concerns with normative definitions of man, woman, and sexuality. “Queer theory” questions the fixed categories of sexual identity and the cognitive paradigms generated by normative (that is, what is considered “normal”) sexual ideology. To “queer” becomes an act by which stable boundaries of sexual identity are transgressed, reversed, mimicked, or otherwise critiqued. “Queering” can be enacted on behalf of all non-normative sexualities and identities as well, all that is considered by the dominant paradigms of culture to be alien, strange, unfamiliar, transgressive, odd—in short, queer. Michel Foucault’s work on sexuality anticipates and informs the Queer theoretical movement in a

role similar to the way his writing on power and discourse prepared the ground for “New Historicism.” Judith Butler contends that heterosexual identity long held to be a normative ground of sexuality is actually produced by the suppression of homoerotic possibility. Eve Sedgwick is another pioneering theorist of “Queer theory,” and like Butler, Sedgwick maintains that the dominance of heterosexual culture conceals the extensive presence of homosocial relations. For Sedgwick, the standard histories of western societies are presented in exclusively in terms of heterosexual identity: “Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Family, Domesticity, Population,” and thus conceiving of homosexual identity within this framework is already problematic.

## 9. Cultural Studies

Much of the intellectual legacy of “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” can now be felt in the “Cultural Studies” movement in departments of literature, a movement not identifiable in terms of a single theoretical school, but one that embraces a wide array of perspectives—media studies, social criticism, anthropology, and literary theory—as they apply to the general study of culture. “Cultural Studies” arose quite self-consciously in the 80s to provide a means of analysis of the rapidly expanding global culture industry that includes entertainment, advertising, publishing, television, film, computers and the Internet. “Cultural Studies” brings scrutiny not only to these varied categories of culture, and not only to the decreasing margins of difference between these realms of expression, but just as importantly to the politics and ideology that make contemporary culture possible. “Cultural Studies” became notorious in the 90s for its emphasis on pop music icons and music video in place of canonical literature, and extends the ideas of the Frankfurt School on the transition from a truly popular culture to mass culture in late capitalist societies, emphasizing the significance of the patterns of consumption of cultural artifacts. “Cultural Studies” has been interdisciplinary, even antidisciplinary, from its inception; indeed, “Cultural Studies” can be understood as a set of sometimes conflicting methods and approaches applied to a questioning of current cultural categories. Stuart Hall, Meaghan Morris, Tony Bennett and Simon During are some of the important advocates of a “Cultural Studies” that seeks to displace the traditional model of literary studies.

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