

LITERARY THEORY

A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

THIRD EDITION

Michael Ryan



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Now in its third edition, *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction* presents a comprehensive introduction to the full range of contemporary approaches to the study of literature and culture, from formalism, structuralism, and historicism to ethnic, gender, and science studies. This edition includes new sections addressing theoretical approaches to literature relating to cognition, emotion, evolution, and animals, humans, places; an expanded section on ethnic, postcolonial, and global studies; and greater attention paid to film and cultural texts to reflect contemporary trends. In addition, a variety of classic literary texts are newly considered in this edition, including *The Great Gatsby*, *The God of Small Things*, *Frankenstein*, and more. Vividly demonstrating how the same classic and contemporary texts – when approached from different perspectives – can lead to surprisingly varied interpretations, chapters reveal illuminating insights into literary texts ranging from *King Lear* and Alice Munro's short stories to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, along with noted films from *Citizen Kane* to *Run, Lola, Run*. The third edition of *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction* is an invaluable resource for anyone tasked with the writing of a critical essay – while allowing all to gain a much deeper appreciation of the literature one reads.

Michael Ryan is Professor of Film and Media Arts at Temple University. His books include *Marxism and Deconstruction* (1982), *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary American Film* (with Douglas Kellner, 1986), *Politics and Culture* (1989), and *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (3rd edition, edited with Julie Rivkin).

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Literary Theory

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*For E. P. Kuhl and Robert Scholes, for
teaching me how to read*

Note to Teachers

This book should be used with the following literary texts:

Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems*

Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Village” (see Appendix)

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Alice Munro, *Selected Stories*

Alice Munro, *Family Furnishings: Selected Stories, 1995–2014*

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

The 1997 National Theatre production of *King Lear* directed by Richard Eyre and starring Ian Holm is an especially good way to get students to engage with the play. It is available on DVD.

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Literary Theory: A Primer

Literary theory begins as a scholarly enterprise with the Greek Enlightenment that occurred in the schools of Athens 2,500 years ago. Humans had been producing literature – long narrative poems recited orally – for several hundred years before that, but with the emergence of the staged stories in Athens written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were prompted to study the products of human culture for the first time, and literary theory was born.

Aristotle devoted his attention to how literature worked, while Plato was more concerned with the universal truths it expressed. The two dimensions of literature that they noted – form and matter, technique and meaning – continue to define what literary theory is about. Literature (and film and theater and television) is a technical enterprise that requires skill in the manipulation of devices from storytelling or narration to figuration or metaphor. It is also an imaginary recasting of human life in all of its dimensions, from personal relations to class politics. Literature draws together all the aspects of our lives and makes them available for study. Indeed, another name for our enterprise might simply be “Life Studies.”

For example, Shakespeare’s play *King Lear* is a portrait of failed family relationships, an argument about politics in early seventeenth-century England, a reflection of Renaissance gender roles, a meditation on what might be called “the human condition” – that we are all a bare forked animal, yet we dress in clothes that distinguish us one from the other –, a covert queer coming-out story, and a portrait of hunger and deprivation during a time of crop failure and famine. But the play is also structured as a dual narrative that has consequences both for the evolution of the story and for the meanings it proposes. Its poetic speeches merit study for Shakespeare’s use of classic rhetorical forms such as chiasmus that, like the dual narrative structure, assist the play’s meaning while lending complex form to its ideas. To study the play properly and fully, you need to draw on both Plato and Aristotle, on both the formal tradition of literary analysis and the semantic dimension of literary meaning.

After the fall of Rome, the study of literature was confined to religious texts for many centuries. The arguments that animated them now seem quaint, but some of the models of analysis that emerged such as hermeneutics (which tied the meaning of each part to the meaning of the whole) and historical criticism (which sought to reconstruct the original context in which texts were written) remain pertinent. After the Renaissance, scholars, with the help of the newly translated Greek texts of Aristotle especially, once again began to study secular literature, and down through the nineteenth century theorists reflected on the nature of literary art and its function in human life. They were primarily concerned with prescribing what literature should do, such as imitate nature. Another important classical idea was the three unities of time, place, and action. A play that begins in Athens should not jump around implausibly from one location to another. Like Plato, Philip Sidney felt that literature should provide moral instruction, and Samuel Johnson shared Aristotle's belief that art provided access to universals.

That Pierre Corneille, the great proponent of the classical unities, chafed under their restrictions indicates what was coming next – a reaction against classicism that took the form of an emphasis on feeling or sentiment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Good writing does not follow classical rules; rather it manifests feelings. Writers and theorists lost faith in the idea that the purpose of literature was moral indoctrination. Emphasis began to be placed on the particular subjective vision of the writer. The new empirical philosophy that developed in England during the seventeenth century, one that emphasized the origin of our ideas in sense impressions, made writers and theorists such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge aware of psychology. They saw literature as the product of the imagination conceived in almost mystical terms as providing access to spiritual truths in nature. Writing imitated nature not by being verisimilar but by being organic, a perfect union of parts in a functioning whole. The influential aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant argued that art was characterized by a “purposefulness without purpose.” The part of our brain that enjoyed art lacked the binding universality of a law of reason. The new emphasis on subjectivity was part of a wider democratic movement to end authoritarian conservative political institutions such as monarchy and to replace them with “republican” governance. Several “Romantic” writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley were also political revolutionists.

The idea that literature should “civilize” by providing moral education was revived by Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century. Arnold's moral touchstones were meant to promulgate the ideals of civility. But this emphasis was countered by a growing materialist movement that rejected the moral understanding of literature and saw art as an end in itself, the experience of which was its own justification. Epicurean

materialists such as Charles Baudelaire and Walter Pater argued for the importance of experience, the consciousness of the passing moments of beauty around one both in nature and in the social world. Baudelaire praised the beauty of women's make-up, while Pater advocated maintaining an awareness like a "hard gem-like flame" of the passing beauty of things. His key term for this attitude toward art and life was "appreciation."

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of literary studies in universities in Germany, France, England, America, and elsewhere, and that institutional development made necessary the development of methods of teaching that were associated with methods for conducting literary research. Two schools of thought were important – historicism and idealism. Historicism, which largely consisted of the study of literature for information regarding the context in which the work was created, became the dominant mode of study by the end of the nineteenth century, but because of the enormous influence of German philosopher Georg Hegel, a school of idealist literary theory (often called Symbolism) also came into being in France, England, Germany, and Russia in the latter decades of the century. Idealism is the belief that there is a spirit world lying behind the material or physical one. Objects in the world embody the Ideal, the perfect form of things that can be reached only through great art. Symbolists believed that poetry captured the essence of the Ideal – the ideal flower absent from all bouquets – through oblique language that eschewed the protocols of positive science which seeks direct knowledge of physical objects. The Symbolist movement's emphasis on the spiritual meaning of literature continued to exercise influence well into the twentieth century, informing the philosophy of the New Criticism in the United States and shaping the assumptions of such writer-theorists as T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats. The spiritualism and political conservatism of the movement came into conflict with the radical forces set loose by World War I in movements such as Dada, which rejected the Christian, royalist, capitalist, conservative culture that gave rise to the war and forged new literary forms to shock the world and help bring about a more rational and enlightened society.

Sharing their aspirations in Russia were a group of young writers and critics – Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and Juri Tinjanov – who rejected the idealism of Symbolism and linked the radical poetic project of shattering the assumptions of bourgeois culture to critical descriptions of how all literature worked. The primary task of poetry was, according to Shklovsky, to defamiliarize our ordinary, overly familiar ways of seeing and thinking. The secularism of the Russian theorists allowed them to favor a more scientific approach to the study of literature. They examined the specific forms of literature as well as the devices and procedures writers used such as the different methods and procedures of storytelling.

While the Symbolists had claimed that the form of literature was determined by its content or ideas, the Russian formalist theorists argued that form was autonomous of content. The motivation for changes in literary forms over time, from the heroic romances of the Middle Ages with their quest narrative storyline to the more episodic picaresque novels of late-eighteenth-century novels such as *The Adventures of Tom Jones* and *Lazarillo de Tormes*, lay entirely within the realm of literary form itself. Writers develop new ways of writing independently of the content of literature. One should therefore be able to write a history of literature entirely in terms of form, and indeed Erich Auerbach attempted just this in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946).

The Russian formal critics studied both narrative and poetic literature. In poetry, they were concerned with the role of euphony as a constructive device as well as with the way poetry arose out of selection amongst similar terms and combination of different ones in a line of verse. Regarding narrative, an important distinction they made was between the supposedly real events a narrative is about (the subject matter) and the narrative that recounts the events, for which the Russians used the term *fabula*. By drawing attention to the way a story is told, attention shifts from questions of character psychology or morality to such issues as point of view, ellipsis, duration, story-within-a-story, stepped narration, framing, flashback, indirect narration, and the like.

This approach was pursued by two later Russian theorists: Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin. Propp's *Morphology of the Folk-Tale* (1927) helped establish the field of narratology. Propp examined several hundred folktales and found that when the events in the tales were converted into abstract "functions" such as "the hero leaves home" or "the hero is tested" that most of the tales had the same underlying narrative structure that concluded with a return home and marriage. And the same is true of modern folktales such as *The Matrix*, a story in which a hero leaves home, is tested, and survives a contest with a nemesis due to a gift given him by a donor. That such stories tend to be about heterosexual men in a gender-divided culture that required the training of men in defensive violence to safeguard the community should alert us to the possibility that forms such as narrative may not be entirely formal. They may serve a biological function connected to how humans evolved. While the narrative structure Propp isolated seems indubitable, its purely formal character as a merely technical device is a matter of debate. It is possible other narrative forms would emerge in a differently evolved bioculture, one in which defensive home forts organized around heterosexual reproduction are not posed against a dangerous external realm.