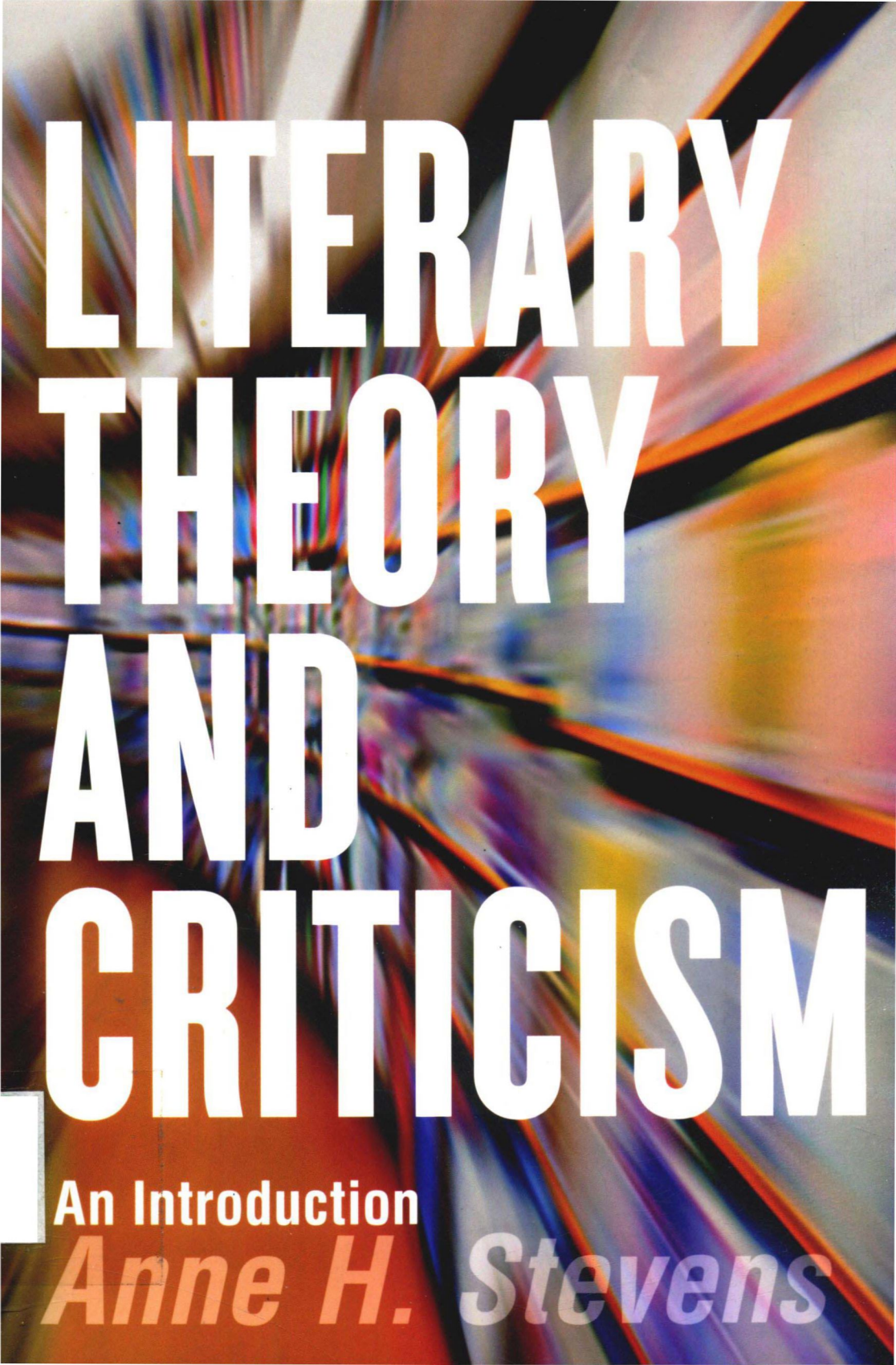
LITERARY
THEORY
AND
CRITICISM
An Introduction
Anne H. Stevens

Literary Theory and Criticism

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MANY BOOKS ON LITERARY theory have already been written, and many more will be written. In my version of the history of theory and criticism, I have tried to touch upon the points I've found most important in my own training and teaching, but I recognize that my biases will show through and that I've had to leave a tremendous amount out. I'm indebted to the teachers who first exposed me to literary theory and criticism as an undergraduate and later as a graduate student: at the University of Chicago, Beth Ash, Wayne Booth, James Chandler, Bert Cohler, Arnold Davidson, James Lastra, Mark Sandberg, and Katie Trumpener; and at New York University, Margaret Cohen, Troy Duster, Dustin Griffin, Paul Magnuson, Mary Poovey, Kristin Ross, Tim Walters, and many others. I'm equally grateful to the students I've taught, especially the many students in ENG 303, Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who have been my unwitting guinea pigs for years.

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One: Introduction

EVERY DAY WE PERFORM countless acts of reading, writing, interpretation, and evaluation. We read signs, write emails, interpret others' behavior, evaluate our lunch options, or just click "like" on a piece of writing or a photo online. At its most basic level, literary theory provides an opportunity to slow down and to reflect upon these activities. Literary theory provides a vocabulary and tools for thinking about reading, writing, and criticism, both everyday acts of evaluation and more academic studies of literature and culture. It can also help you to place your acts of evaluation into a school of thought with a long historical lineage. In this chapter, I provide a broad overview of literary theory and criticism – its definition, a thumbnail sketch of its history, a summary of some of its major concerns, and a few tips for getting started. I introduce topics here that I explore in more detail in the later chapters of the book.

This book focuses on *literary* theory and criticism, that is, on theoretical and critical issues related to questions of language, literature, writing, and interpretation. In other contexts, you might see the terms **CULTURAL THEORY**,[1] **CRITICAL THEORY**, or just plain theory. Cultural theory can refer to theoretical writings related to culture more broadly – not only literary works but also film, music, advertising, sports, and everyday life. Critical theory or theory usually means theoretical writings, often with a strong philosophical dimension, not limited to those that deal with literary and cultural concerns. Many of these texts deal with the same issues as literary theory and cultural theory, though perhaps with a greater emphasis on abstract, overarching issues and with a more **INTERDISCIPLINARY** focus that draws from different areas of academic study (including political theory, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology). **LITERARY THEORY**, as opposed to this broader sense of theory, includes more writers and texts concerned specifically with issues related to literature – such as poetic form, author biography, and literary genre – but a survey of literary

1 A note on the text: definitions of terms in **SMALL CAPS** can be found in the glossary at the end of the volume.

theory usually does include a number of thinkers, such as Karl Marx (1818–83) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who don't necessarily write about literature but whose ideas have influenced literary study.

A cornerstone of literary theory is a belief in the **CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION** of knowledge. Historical and cultural circumstances shape our ideas about truth, beauty, education, art and literature, food, clothing, and everything else. This may seem like a very obvious point – of course different cultures and historical periods have different standards of beauty or cuisines – but it becomes trickier to keep in mind when it comes to thinking about things that seem natural, such as gender and sexuality, or about one's own most cherished beliefs. Just because something is constructed, though, doesn't mean that it is not real. The houses and apartments that we live in are real, material objects even though they are products of human construction. Similarly, ideas about truth, beauty, and the other matters mentioned above take shape through historical processes, are continually evolving, and vary from one culture to another, but even though they're not universal and unchanging, they still have real effects on the world. Literary theory gives you a way to step back and think about the constructedness of culture and to reflect upon your own preconceptions. It can provide you with a greater self-consciousness about your acts as a reader, critic, and member of society. Looking at the history of critical debates and becoming more aware of unspoken presuppositions can help you understand literature, and maybe even the world, a little bit better.

Even everyday conversations can contain fairly complex acts of evaluation that literary theory and a greater degree of self-reflectiveness can help to decipher. For example, people often assert that some particular book, movie, athlete, or restaurant is "overrated" or "underrated." Here one word conceals a complicated theoretical framework. To call something overrated implies a comparison between two different acts of "rating" or two different critical standards. Usually these two consist of your own act of evaluation and the rest of the world's: even though everyone else loves X (Cristiano Ronaldo, Chipotle, Disneyland), that acclaim or commercial success isn't really deserved, and actually X should be "rated" much lower (because Ronaldo was disappointing at the World Cup, Chipotle's burritos are soggy, Disneyland is just too crowded). Conversely, saying that X (an independent film or musician, for example) is underrated suggests that you can see merit where others do not, and that the evaluative system of the rest of the world is flawed (maybe because people don't know about the work because of a lack of distribution or promotion, because it goes over the heads of many people, or because it challenges conventional ideas about sex or politics). So the next time you hear someone make a casual remark about something being "overrated," challenge them to slow down and explain

why they think that their opinion should be given more weight than that of the rest of the world. Thinking through our too often unreflective acts of judgment is a good way to help develop greater theoretical awareness and thus to become more careful and thoughtful critics. Everyone knows *what* they like and dislike, but theorists reflect upon *why* they like and dislike.

In the broadest sense, literary theory and criticism can include a wide range of activities, such as teaching and studying works of literature, book reviewing, reading groups, and online discussions. The critical assumptions or theoretical perspectives underlying these activities can be more or less obvious, more or less self-conscious. For example, all courses on literature employ one or more critical perspectives, such as formalism or historicism. Sometimes teachers will outline their method and assumptions at the start of a course or will suggest other possible methods of study along the way, but at other times it is up to the students to deduce what type of critical approach they're being presented with. Certain other types of courses, with names such as Introduction to Literary Theory, Literary Methods, or Feminist (or Postcolonial, or Marxist) Theory, study approaches to literature rather than only the literary works themselves. A course on literary theory will tend to focus on the underlying questions of method within literary studies and will read works *about* literature rather than (or in addition to) works *of* literature. A course in literary theory is to a literature major what a statistics class is to a psychology major: it focuses on the methods of study and equips you with some technical tools for pursuing advanced studies in the area.

Most literary theorists don't believe that there's a single, correct interpretation for a given literary work, but instead believe that great works of literature provide ample room for multiple interpretations. That's precisely what makes literature worth studying. Questions of meaning and interpretation in literary studies aren't trivia questions. What matters when you take on the big questions of literary theory isn't so much *what* you answer, but *how* you explore the issue. Because there are no easy answers, making an argument about a literary text involves finding compelling evidence to support your claim and arranging it in the most persuasive way possible. In the process of studying literary theory and using it to make arguments, you can hone your argumentative and critical thinking skills, learn about different cultures and historical periods, witness ongoing debates about key issues, and even be entertained along the way.

Theory vs. Criticism

So what's the difference between literary theory and **LITERARY CRITICISM**? In general, *literary theory* refers to writings that deal with the underlying principles associated with the study of literature, language, interpretation, culture, and all sorts of related issues. Many of the thinkers who have shaped major theoretical approaches to literature come from areas outside the boundaries of traditional literary studies, especially in fields such as philosophy and the social sciences. *Literary criticism* usually refers to analysis of a particular work or works: studies of individual authors, genres, literary movements, and the like.

The two terms are closely related, however, since both literary theorists and literary critics study literary texts using a theoretical framework. One way to conceive of the difference between the two relates to the underlying aims of the writing. A work of literary theory might use literary texts as examples or illustrations in the service of developing a larger theoretical point, while a literary critic might use a theoretical perspective in the service of better understanding a literary text. The distinction is quite subtle and subjective, though, because these two sides – theory and practice – constantly reinforce each other: criticism of works can be used to develop larger theoretical points, while large theoretical points can provide a foundation for analyzing individual works.

In order to better understand this distinction between theory and criticism, I'll use the example of the field known as **QUEER THEORY**, which I discuss in Chapter 8. Queer theory was developed by scholars who study sexuality, gay and lesbian literature, transgender issues, and related matters. Under this larger heading, some of these scholars' works might better be thought of as theory and some as criticism. French historian Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976–84), for example, is a good example of a work of theory. His multi-volume work (left unfinished at his death) examines the ways in which our ideas about sexuality are historically constructed and shaped by the power relations of their time. Although Foucault (1926–84) uses literary texts here and there to illustrate his points, the central goal of his argument is to outline a new way of conceiving of sexuality as culturally constructed rather than biological and unchanging. In contrast, a literary critic might take Foucault's theoretical ideas about the fluidity of sexual identity and apply them to a text such as William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601–02), a play that features cross-dressing and same-sex attraction between characters. This hypothetical critic isn't developing his or her own theoretical perspective so much as using Foucault's theories as a means to better understand Shakespeare's play. However, someone like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009), another founding figure in queer theory, might be said to blur the distinction I'm trying to draw here between theory