

LITERARY THEORY

A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

THIRD EDITION

Michael Ryan



WILEY Blackwell

Literary Theory

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

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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.

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.

Bakhtin was more concerned with the way novels merged different language forms or discourses. Religious discourse uses a particular set of terms and relies on different modes such as prayer, sermon or parable. A lawyerly discourse has its own terms and its own modes such as plea or accusation. The realist novels of Dickens and Tolstoy are distinguished by the confluence of discourses that interact with one another. If poems have one voice and are as a result monologic, novels contain multiple voices of different characters and are dialogic. Because of the multiplicity of voices and discourses in a novel, they are heteroglossic. Moreover, novelists incorporate other discourses by stylizing them. To stylize is to use a discourse in a way that draws attention to its status as a discourse. Parody and satire are two ways of incorporating another discourse that draw attention to the way it is worded and underscores the fact that it is a particular way of speaking.

The new attention to how literary language worked was facilitated by the emergence of linguistics as a scientific endeavor in the early twentieth century. The extremely influential work of Ferdinand de Saussure was familiar to the Russians – especially two members of the Moscow Linguistics Circle: Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy. Saussure pointed out that each part of language has an identity only in relation to the other parts of the language. In language there are no identities, only differences. In phonology, the word “hat” has an identity only by differing from similar but different sounding words such as “cat.” Its meaning and its identity is given by difference from other terms within the language system. Jakobson noted that each distinctive feature of language is shaped by a binary opposition such as voiced/nonvoiced or vocalic/nonvocalic. Finally, another important linguistic idea that would assist literary theorists is value. Prior linguistics conceived of words as names for things, but Saussure argued that each word has a value in a language system in which each part serves a distinct function. Its value consists of the role it plays as, for example, a nominative or a modifier. One could now think of language more abstractly, as a system of rules and functions (*langue*) like the rules of chess that can give rise to an infinite set of possibilities in speech (*parole*). One could do the same with literature of course – see it as structure rather than as a specific work by a specific writer. Now, all narratives could be studied as examples of the rules and conventions of narrative discourse.

Roman Jakobson left Russia in the 1920s for Prague and then Paris before settling in the United States. He introduced the ideas of structural linguistics to French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss who developed a structuralist version of anthropology that described the deep structures of human cultures, the basic binary oppositions such as that between cooked and raw food that shaped cultural values. Levi-Strauss’ application of the linguistic model to the study of myth and to the story

of Oedipus was very influential. Using the dialectical method as well as Jakobson's notion of binary opposition, he saw myth as reconciling contending aspects of human life. Saussure's lectures – *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) – became popular in France in the 1950s and they influenced Roland Barthes, who launched the semiological study of literature in such books as *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Mythologies* (1957), and *Elements of Semiology* (1964). Semiology considered literature to be a sign system like language. Barthes most innovative work was in the study of popular culture, where he noticed how signifiers (words or images) in advertising and popular film point to signifieds (ideas or meanings) that are linked to myths about the world that prevent us from seeing the world accurately. Other structuralist literary theorists such as Tzvetan Todorov (*The Poetics of Prose*, 1971), Alexander Greimas (*Structural Semantics*, 1966), and Gerard Genette (*Narrative Discourse*, 1972) studied narratives for their "archi-textual" common structures and shared devices such as "focalization," "frequency," "actants," and "duration." Structuralists sought to convert specific instances in fiction into abstract terms that could be found in different works of literature. Todorov proposed, for example, that all of Henry James' short stories could be reduced to a single quest for an absent center.

The ideas of linguistics also influenced French psychoanalysis in the work of Jacques Lacan, who recharacterized Sigmund Freud's distinction between consciousness and the unconscious in semiotic terms. We can only know our unconscious through symptoms or dreams that are like signifiers, but what they signify is inaccessible to us, a "real" that we can only know through its "symbolic" manifestations because our conscious awareness is inherently narcissistic and prone to "imaginary" delusions. It "mis-recognizes" its own unconscious nature.

The most influential French structuralist was Michel Foucault. Foucault's contribution to structuralist analysis was his concept of the "discursive formation." In studying the history of how madness was conceptualized in religious and scientific discourses from the Middle Ages to the present, Foucault found that the meaning of madness changed and that the words used to describe it evolved. The mad were initially described as mystics but by the nineteenth century they had become deviants requiring regulation. Each way of conceptualizing them arose within a particular, historically located discursive formation that operated according to distinct axioms, rules, and procedures for processing the world and understanding it in different ways. Foucault also studied the history of discourse regarding sexuality and advanced the idea that the repression of sexual minorities had given way with time to a different kind of control that worked as positive knowledge that turned them into objects of observation, analysis, categorization, and scientific inquiry.

In the anglophone world, a shift occurred after World War I toward the study of literary texts independent of their historical or biographical context. I. A. Richards' *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) isolated poems from their contexts and asked students to study them on their own terms as acts of language. Richards invented the approach called "close reading," whereby a text is carefully analyzed for its use of literary devices such as metaphor and meter. From Richards' work sprang the American New Criticism, which also argued for paying attention to literary form and especially to devices such as paradox that embodied universal ideas in concrete imagistic forms. They saw poems especially as consisting of a tension between image and idea, universals and their specific concrete instantiation in the literary work. All poems, therefore, are inherently paradoxical because they are two quite different things at once. At their most extreme, the New Critics were religionists who believed that the universals communicated in poetry were spiritual in character.

Continental European literary theory in the early to mid-twentieth century was also influenced by phenomenology, the philosophy developed by Edmund Husserl that studied how the mind grasped the truth of an object (a phenomenon) as it appears in conscious awareness. Husserl argued that the mind could transcend the worldly character of objects and arrive at pure ideas about them that were akin to the abstractions of geometry (such as the perfect triangle that can be imagined but that exists nowhere in the world). His focus on conscious awareness spawned an interest on the part of philosophers and literary theorists such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roman Ingarden, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Wolfgang Iser, and Georges Poulet in the study of the way the mind processes literature in the act of reading. This interest was transferred to the USA by Poulet, where it influenced Stanley Fish, who founded an approach to literary study called "reader response." Drawing on some of the ideas of rhetoric, this approach studied how a writer shapes the reader's perceptions and beliefs in the act of reading.

The thinking about literature and culture that grew out of the work of Karl Marx in the nineteenth century also played a role in shaping twentieth-century thinking about literature and culture. Marxists were interested in ending economic inequality and bringing about a society in which wealth would be shared equally. They argued that the ruling ideas of any era are likely to favor the interests of those in economic power. But they also saw literature as putting on display the hidden contradictions of economic systems such as capitalism, which declares freedom to be a universal value yet enslaves the majority in wage labor that benefits the minority.

The method of analysis used by Marxists is called the dialectic, and it was invented in its modern form by Hegel who, in his *The Phenomenology*

of *Mind* (1807), sought to describe how knowledge worked. He wanted to counter the British empiricists, who argued that ideas in our mind derive from sense impressions, and Kant, who believed our innate capacity for reason converts sense data into ideas. Hegel said both are true, and he set out to describe the connection. The dialectical method of analysis begins with particular sense data (knowledge of a single object). But such focus on a particular object of knowledge immediately invites reflection on what the particular object is not. It is not a concept or idea or category. We look at the legal system, for example, and see a law, but to understand a particular law fully we need to know what the principle or idea is that makes it a law. So the sense datum (particular law in this instance) is incomplete and requires something other to complete it. To be understood fully, the particular object must be matched to an idea, and the movement from determinate concrete object to idea is a necessary development of the analysis of what the object is. But something similar happens when one moves to the side of the idea. Considered on its own, the idea to which one moves is empty and abstract because it lacks a particular concrete form to embody it. It is an idea about law but not an actual concrete law. So a movement back to the concrete object occurs. We see now that each presupposes the other and needs the other to complete itself. An abstract idea of law needs a concrete object, a specific law, to be complete, while a concrete law presupposes an idea of law to be what it is.

Through a process of logical development, one ends up with something more complicated that combines the two sides of the analysis. Each side – particular thing and general category – is incomplete without the other. They must be merged to form a more complete, more complex whole. However, this process continues, since the new whole will itself be incomplete without something else that is its negation and so on until in the end a great totality is reached that encompasses all aspects of the topic being examined such as philosophy or justice or art.

Marx transferred Hegel's method to the study of capitalism. If one begins with a simple sensory object in capitalism, such as a car for sale, one finds through a dialectical analysis that the car presupposes a system of production that subordinates workers to owners so that the car can embody the value of underpaid human labor, value that is then converted into profit for the owner. Marx argued that the logical development over time of the dialectic inherent in capitalism would lead to the supersession of capitalism and the emergence of a more egalitarian economic system.

A major figure in Marxist literary theory was the Hungarian Georg Lukacs whose *The Historical Novel* (1937) was an important statement of the Marxist approach. Lukacs argued that even reactionary writers such as Honore de Balzac could be used for Marxist purposes. According to Lukacs, each writer captures the totality of his or her era, and

by so doing displays historical forces at work that were tending necessarily toward the liberation of the working class. Marxists conceive of the social world as riven by contradictions – between, for example, the capitalist class and the working class – and any accurate picture of society will put those contradictions on display. Realist novels, even when written by pro-capitalist conservatives, thus serve a useful purpose. They expose the contradictions of capitalism, its inability to ever quell or remove the inequality that is its founding axiom.

In the middle of the twentieth century in Germany, another group of Marxist theorists (often referred to as the “Frankfurt School”) studied the politics of aesthetics and the role of popular culture under capitalism. Some of these theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno conceived of art as negating the banality of consciousness that capitalism promotes. Capitalist cultural products secure unquestioning consent through rote, repetitive forms such as generic movies. To acquiesce to capitalist popular culture, according to them, is to accept a limited awareness that is uncritical. Art, in contrast, offers a negation of capitalist culture. In its very complexity of form, art breaks the cultural stereotypes prevalent under capitalism and transforms consciousness. Other theorists such as Ernst Bloch saw culture as containing utopian aspirations. Understood dialectically, reality is dynamic, internally contradictory, and forward pointing, and so is culture. It can be seen as having “utopian potentials” buried within even its most banal forms, for those forms, in their popularity, record yearnings for a transcendence of the limitation on life that capitalism imposes.

Another member of this group of “critical theorists,” Walter Benjamin argued that the cinema held out the possibility of eroding the aura that attaches to high art and helps support an elitist view of culture. New technologies that allow for ease of reproduction disseminate art more widely and transform consciousness in positive ways. He was more inclined to see popular culture as contributing to the Marxist project of liberating humanity from economic slavery. In his one major work of literary criticism, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), he proposed an innovative method of historical research that linked literature with its historical context. Rather than see the relationship of literature, politics, and history as a dialectical totality, he conceived of it as a constellation of fragments.

Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, advanced an influential theory of ideology in the 1960s. Drawing on Lacan’s psychoanalysis, which unfortunately had no basis in empirical analysis or case studies, Althusser proposed that the sense we have of being individual selves blinds us to our disadvantaged location in the capitalist system. Our lives as workers make us slaves, but we are told we are free individuals. The critique of the ideology of freedom is accurate, but the location of

ideological false knowledge in the sense of being an individual self flies in the face of current research in psychology regarding how we develop as humans to separate, individuate, and become independent selves. Rather than be the root of our enslavement to capitalism, a strong, healthy self armed with objective, critical thinking abilities is the best weapon we have against our transformation into usable and disposable workers under capitalism. Althusser's condemnation of the individual is also an effect of a dubious communist ideology that arose during the Stalinist era and that he, as a member of the French Communist Party, shared. It saw virtue in the collective and vice in any individual deviation from the submersion of the individual in the totality. Marx himself took a much more nuanced approach to the question of human liberation and saw the success of the whole socialist or communist society as being premised dialectically on the power it accorded each individual member to grow to his or her fullest extent.

The period from the end of World War II to the 1960s witnessed several different kinds of revolution. Colonized peoples rose up against their European masters. Women rose up against the domination of men. Young people rose up against conservative social policies that required them to fight wars for immoral ends. Democratic liberals rebelled against the conservative authoritarianism of the Stalinist system. People of color rose up against the informal slavocracy of the United States. And gays rose up against their heterosexual oppressors. It was also a time of revolt against some of the most egregious excesses of profit-driven capitalism such as the destruction of the physical environment, the immoral sale of dangerous products to duped consumers, and the exclusion of certain groups such as women and ethnic minorities from employment. Not surprisingly, perhaps, something like a revolution also occurred in literary theory, art, the cinema, and literature.

Because patriarchal, heterosexist, capitalist, colonialist, and ethnic domination usually imposed a disciplinary control on the subordinated, the revolutions in culture often were against rules or norms associated with a normality that increasingly looked tainted by bad values and practices such as racism, sexism, and militarism. Art became parodic and critical. Literature assumed "postmodern" guises that were critical of existing "reality." The cinema, especially the French New Wave, rejected the grammar of Hollywood-dominated commercial film-making. The rupture of rote routinized forms once again became a popular radical gesture. Dada was reborn.

Literary theory also began to change in significant ways. The first change had to do with constituencies. The New Criticism, which dominated literary study from the 1940s to the 1960s, gave preference to white male writers. The eruption of the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, and the anti-imperialist

and anticolonial uprisings around the world put an end to that placid assumption. It was no longer possible to teach literature courses with only white male writers when covering a tradition such as that of the USA that included many female and ethnic minority writers. The cultures of conquered indigenous peoples could no longer be considered a footnote to the heroic narrative of white settlement. These changes prompted the emergence of new theories that took ethnic and gender relations into account and that sought to theorize the specific characteristics of particular strains of literature by women or African Americans or indigenous people or gays. In each instance, theorists attempted to develop a mode of literary representation that somehow matched the identity of the group. Hélène Cixous argued for “feminine writing,” a style founded in mixture and parataxis that broke from traditional narrative logic and eschewed the form associated with rational discourse of the kind that had favored male rule in western culture. African American theorist Henry Louis Gates proposed a style of linguistic subversion called “signifying” that mocked and undermined the pretensions of the dominant white discourse in America. Gay theorist Lee Edelman cleverly argued that gays are subversively “homographic” because gayness, an internal quality, is not manifest in signs that render it legible. Finally, theorists such as Gerard Vizenor suggested that the trickster figure in Native American culture represented an alternative to white narratives of domination over nature, while indigenous theorists such as Elvira Pulitano argued instead for seeing indigenous literature as embodying traditional native cultural beliefs and forms such as a repetitively cyclical narrative.

The struggles against colonialism around the globe and the emergence of postcolonial cultures made literary theorists aware of the need to find ways of explaining the work of literature in situations of imperial domination. Literary theorists such as Edward Said studied the discourses that facilitated and legitimated imperial rule, while postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha theorized ways that subalterns resist domination, and Paul Gilroy described a new transnational black culture that spanned the Atlantic and gave rise to new hybridic cultural forms. Among writers, debates emerged between those who favored adapting to the literary forms of the colonizing countries and those who favored finding in one’s own national cultural resources modes of literary expression more suited to one’s own needs. With time, more synergistic forms emerged as, for example, in Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Hyenas* (1992), which adapted a European play to an African story and used the play to oppose economic colonialism, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), which told a uniquely Indian tale in a style influenced by James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

In addition to the emergence of new constituencies and of theories suitable to their concerns, the revolutions of the 1960s also brought about a major methodological change in literary theory. Structuralism studied the way literature and culture is ordered like language. Language is a rule-bound system. It has a temporal or diachronic axis as well as a spatial or synchronic axis. It creates linkages between terms in a chain that are syntagmatic, while choosing between possible terms at any point in the sequence that can substitute for one another (paradigm sets). These mechanisms lend order to the known world and allow us to function within our cultural universe. But Saussure noticed as well that the links between words and things are entirely arbitrary, and the identity of any one term in language is entirely relational or differential. That languages change so quickly over time (with Middle English of just a few hundred years ago no longer legible to most of us and Shakespearean English fast becoming incomprehensible to new generations) is an indicator of just how insubstantial, contingent, and ephemeral language is. It may be systematic, but its systematicness is that of a cloud.

Moreover, the rise of semiology or the study of signs from Charles Sanders Peirce in the nineteenth century down through Saussure, Barthes, and cyberneticists of the 1960s such as Norbert Wiener made clear that the world itself is semiotic in character. The objects we live with are significant, and one meaning of the word “culture” is that all the things that we make have a function, value, and meaning in our lives that is interpretable. They are signs of the meanings they have for us and the uses we make of them. We ourselves, considered historically, sociologically, and psychologically, are semiotic. Our behavior indicates states of mind that manifest themselves in gestural signs. Our identities have historical and biological roots and speak of sociological zones from which we emerge, be they of gender, class, or educational culture. We are all meaningful, all worthy objects of study for the genetic, social, and cultural codes we embody.

Philosophers in the 1960s began to take stock of the implications of these ideas, and it led them to question our standard assumptions about philosophy and its ability to map the world using words. If the things we seek to know move constantly through time and are differentially located in space in relation to one another so that everything is both self and other at once, and if the language we use to know them is equally temporal and spatially differential, how can we possibly anchor knowledge in anything like certainty, let alone claim to have established truth understood as a perfect match of word and world? It would be like using a thunder storm to map a hurricane. The risks of inaccuracy are high. But if you do manage to pull it off, lots will have to be left out, and the order you succeed in imposing on the world will be only tentatively firm

and arguably decisive while being fringed by a halo of incalculability, a remainder that can never be taken into account fully.

Two French philosophers were especially influential in moving us to be less naive about the ability of words and ideas to match simply and easily with things. Jacques Derrida noticed that the orders we make of the world follow a similar pattern. They posit an axiom or ground of value such as the idea that truth is a presence in the mind. They then declare other things to be secondary, derivative, less substantial, and of less value. He was especially attracted to the way the concept of nature is used to suggest something more authentic, real, and living that serves as a measure of truth in thinkers as diverse as Rousseau and Levi-Strauss. Declared derivative, secondary, and of less value in relation to this ideal of natural truth by these thinkers were such things as technology, artifice, imitation, and signification. This value scheme turned up predictably in western philosophy Derrida found, even in supposedly post-metaphysical analytic philosophy, which naively separated citation in theatrical plays from original speech acts performed in real-world situations, not recognizing that any speech act, to be original and pure and effective, must cite a code. It is as much a re-citation as a line from *Hamlet*. Such argumentative turnarounds or deconstructions were endlessly annoying for their victims, and Derrida was for many decades a controversial figure in philosophical discussions.

For literary theory, Derrida's most important contribution was the idea that the differential character of literary texts (whereby the identity of any one element is inseparable from its differences from other elements) extends beyond the boundaries of the text into the world. If the world is itself semiotic, then at no point does literary interpretation arrive at a final meaning or truth that is not yet another signifier. Even the life of the author, while it may consist of flesh and blood, also consists of signs that refer beyond themselves for their meaning – endlessly. Many now see this argument as advancing a new kind of materialism, since it precludes something like the New Critical conclusion that a literary text at some point ceases to be textual and instead elevates into a transcendental signified or universal meaning that is metaphysical, idealist, and quasi-spiritual in character.

Derrida's three books of 1967 – *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology*, and *The Origin of Geometry* – and his essay "Differance" (1966) launched what would come to be called post-structuralism, a movement that shifted attention away from the structuralist quest for the hidden order in things to the study of the way our systems for imposing order on the world are founded on a life process in movement through time and space that requires a much more complex calculus based on relational terms in order to be understood. Under Derrida's influence, Roland Barthes switched from being a structuralist to being a post-structuralist in two

important essays – “The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text.” Similarly, Julia Kristeva began to argue that certain kinds of radical literature undermined all notions of “thetic” meaning. A method of analysis called deconstruction modeled on Derrida’s work arose in the USA. Its primary practitioners were Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, and J. Hillis Miller. Such analysis sought to demonstrate that literary texts did not resolve into determinable meanings. The influence of these critics has waned, but Derrida’s idea that identity is differential (which is to say, it is dependent on an other to which it relates in an essential way) has remained important especially for theorists concerned with such relational issues as ethics and the human/nonhuman distinction. Moreover, because Derrida equated “logocentrism” – the idea that truth-as-presence in the mind is the gold standard of truth – with phallogocentrism – the rule of men in western culture –, feminists drew on his work to argue for a feminine difference from male culture. Philosopher Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977) suggested that the “feminine” was opposed to male logocentric rationality and deconstructed the binary oppositions such as reason/emotion that had sustained male rule over women.

The other French philosopher who moved beyond structuralism under Derrida’s influence was Gilles Deleuze. He argued in *The Logic of Meaning* (1969) that meaning arises from a well of nonsense, the mash of sounds that are cut and shaped by language to make words. Our ideas are similarly derived from a materiality of ideation that is in movement (becoming) such that any stabilization of being through the forming of an identity out of matter will be conventional, temporary, and ultimately unreliable. This way of thinking owes a great deal to two earlier philosophers on whom Deleuze wrote books – Friedrich Nietzsche and Baruch Spinoza. Nietzsche argued that all identity and all truth are fictions of a stable being imposed on a world in motion, while Spinoza described the world as consisting of nothing but matter and that mind was included in matter. In his collaboration with Felix Guattari – *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) – Deleuze developed a materialist account of human history that emphasized changing regimes of power and domination (“territories”) that could be undone or “deterritorialized” by “lines of flight.” Deleuze’s emphasis on the materiality that binds human subjects to worldly objects has been important to new materialist literary theorists who are interested in moving beyond the category of “the human” and in promoting a sense of the immersion of humanity in the material world.

The old historicist study of literature was shunted aside in the USA by the New Criticism, which favored the study of texts in isolation from their historical contexts. In England, however, historical study was better able to carry on, especially in the work of Raymond Williams,

whose *The Country and the City* (1973) provided a long overview of English literature, and Ian Watt, whose *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) became a classic of historical study. From the 1980s on, a new generation of “cultural materialist” English historical scholars such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield combined formal, historical, and political analysis to argue for a radical understanding of writers such as Shakespeare.

Historical study acquired a new dynamism in the USA in the 1980s under the influence of Michel Foucault. In the work of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt and in the journal *Representations*, a “new” historicism emerged that had clearly learned from French theory. It connected major literary texts to a historical context understood to be itself textual or semiotic, and it linked modes of literary argument and representation with the practices of statecraft in eras such as the Elizabethan when power depended so much on display and representation. Greenblatt argued against the British cultural materialists such as Sinfield – who found evidence of “fault-lines” or moments of ideological dissonance in writers such as Shakespeare – that Shakespeare only pretended to question power but in fact furthered its interests through his very acts of apparent subversion.

The feminism and gay/lesbian movements of the 1970s and 1980s were joined in the 1990s by a new more activist brand of literary and cultural study called Queer Theory, which argued for the radical contingency of gender – the idea that one’s gender identity might have nothing to do with one’s sexual biology, and sexual biology might itself be mutable and indeterminate. A very helpful theorist who contributed to this way of thinking was Judith Butler, whose important *Gender Trouble* (1984) separated gender from biology by contending that gender is performed into being. We imitate ideals of gender in our culture and perform the roles they prescribe. But those performed roles may have nothing to do with our biological sex or our sexual desires. Drawing on Butler’s work, Jose Munoz argued that we should dis-identify with reigning gender norms and create new plural and dissident gender possibilities.

Science and ecology have been two of the most important new movements in literary theory. Science includes neuroscience, evolutionary biology, affect theory, and cognitive studies. Cognitive theory is concerned with how the mind works, with the effect of literature on our minds, and with the relationship between cognition and the body. Cognitive theorists argue that our thinking consists of metaphors that imitate bodily schema such as up/down and forward/backward. Our bodily orientation in space shapes how we think. In a play such as *King Lear*, metaphors of relationship such as “bonds” draw on bodily schemes and translate them into cognitive metaphors.

The study of emotion and its regulation has assumed an important place both in developmental psychology and in neuroscience. In the psychology of human development from infant to adult, the acquisition of an ability to regulate affect is central to the emergence of an independent self. Scientists now know from MRI tests that the cingulate and orbito-frontal cortex allow the developing child to make permanent the benefits of maternal sustaining attention. The child is better able to regulate its own emotional life because its capacity to imitate allows it to create representations of its absent primary objects. Such representations are important for affect regulation. But a strong capacity for affect regulation is clearly differentially distributed in the human population. Some have a harder time overcoming prejudice than others. Sarah Ahmed notes that the “organization of hate” and its direction against immigrants is crucial to the mustering of opposition to the building of more cosmopolitan, transethnic communities.

Emotion studies is by now a well-established subdiscipline within literary studies. One of its leading practitioners, Lauren Berlant, describes the relationship between “public feelings” and the ideological work of capitalism to secure allegiance for a social system founded on the unequal distribution of wealth. One such public feeling is optimism regarding one’s ability to rise up the income and class ladder in a capitalist economy founded on “free” market principles that weaken or nullify the government’s (and the community’s) role in managing the economy to assure greater equality of income. Berlant characterizes such optimism regarding “freedom” as cruel because it offers hope of eventual economic success to working-class people whose fixed location as workers is reinforced by “free” market economic policies. The effect of those policies, which keep wages low in order to assure higher income for owners, is to make the class system static. “Freedom” suggests fluidity, flexibility, and plasticity, but those qualities only apply to the investment accounts of capital owners. Otherwise, the idea of freedom neutralizes the community’s ability to restrain predatory economic behavior using governmental means.

Many works of great literature such as *King Lear* are also works of great emotion, and any critical theory of the play needs to attend to those emotions and adduce their origins. The king makes a mistake and is shamed because of it. Why would a work of literature draw attention to shaming? One reason may be that shaming is an essential educational tool in human development that teaches us the unacceptability of certain kinds of harmful emotional reactions and the danger of behaviors that do not accord with the principles of civility that assure human survival. Shame serves a useful civilizing function.

Evolutionary theory attempts to account for the emergence of such aspects of our nature. When early humans began to live together in large

heterogeneous communities consisting of both kin and non-kin, they needed to evolve regulatory mechanisms in their brains that diminished the damage done by automatic negative emotional signals such as prejudice and rage that aided survival at earlier historical stages of human existence. It is likely that psychological mechanisms also evolved that permitted early humans to correct their own behavior. The evolution of a capacity for shame would have been one of those mechanisms.

Evolutionary literary theory emerged in the United States in the work of Jonathan Gottschall, Joseph Carroll, and Nancy Easterlin in the early twenty-first century. The focus of the theory is the adaptive function of human emotions such as jealousy and such rituals as mating. Guided largely by the sociobiology of the 1970s rather than recent genetic theory or recent evolutionary biology, this school of criticism focuses on issues of human reproduction. Other evolutionary literary theorists such as Bryan Boyd are concerned with the social meaning of the adaptations that over time went into the making of modern *Homo sapiens*, especially storytelling. Evolutionary anthropologists now believe that the development of a capacity for short-term memory was crucial in human evolution. And storytelling is one manifestation of the new cognitive talent that made possible the emergence of complex human civilization.

The rediscovery of the materialist philosophy of Spinoza through the work of Antonio Negri, Giorgio Agamben, and Gilles Deleuze is one important ingredient in the emergence of the “new materialism” in the literary, cultural, and social sciences. For Spinoza, a monist, there is no distinction between the human and the natural or material world. The human mind is material. We are animals and have no reason to assume we are superior in a juridical way to other animals. According to the anthropocentric humanism of the Renaissance, our humanity is constituted by the suppression of our animal natures, those passions that are alien to civil living and moral rules. *Hamlet* is a play that depicts the struggle between the ideal of self-control in human civilization and supposedly animal or bodily passions that give rise to excessive behavior that is destructive of civility and offensive to morality.

The rise of environmentalism and ecology since the 1960s has made us more aware of our “nature” and of our proximity to animals. Ecology posits a continuum of existence that binds human life to its surroundings and its cohabitants on the earth. Theorists such as Donna Haraway now argue that we need to understand animals as “companion species.” And literary theorists have begun to examine the role of animals in literature. *King Lear* is radically materialist in this regard. Shakespeare repeatedly reminds us of the fundamental bodily character of life. Our pretenses to civility are often just that – attempts to hide a physical nature we share with animals. Beneath the trappings of humanity, we are all “poor forked creatures.”

Ecology or environmentalism initially was concerned with the place of landscape and nature in literature, but over time that focus has widened to include a bioregional approach that includes the social aspects of the environment such as economic and social class. The setting of many of Russell Banks' novels in upstate New York is both natural and economic, according to Keith Ryden, because poverty plays so important a role in the lives of the characters. Cityscapes are now also considered important environments in many works of literature. The world of China Mieville's fiction is a London of many different neighborhoods and neighborhood cultures, while the distinction between Ontario's rural homes in which bathroom noises are not easily concealed and Vancouver's massive homes that put distance between themselves and the sordidness and banality of poverty is a striking feature of the short stories of Alice Munro.

The study of material culture has been a feature of other disciplines such as history and anthropology for some time. Charlotte Sussman in a 1994 essay discussed the role of sugar in English culture of the late eighteenth century and in the struggle to abolish slavery. With his essay "Thing Theory" in 2001, Bill Brown introduced literary scholars to material culture studies. This work has led to fruitful new work on such overlooked aspects of literature as food: for instance, there is a course on "Novel Commodities" at Connecticut College that examines the role of such marketed goods as canned meat and sugar in novels as diverse as Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*.

As this summary suggests, there are many frontiers of literary theory. Its history is far from over, its primer far from complete. One frontier points beyond gender toward a more trans and poly understanding of the erotic dimension of life. Another frontier deepens our understanding of how cultural representations link directly to the brain and, through the brain, to our evolved biology. Another frontier explores political difference. Many of us still live emotionally in the Pleistocene, experiencing prejudice and fear in ancestral doses. Another frontier is the data mining that the digitizing of the historical archive makes possible. The digital archive also creates a new reticulated connectivity that facilitates access to the physical sciences that should expand our ability to draw on such fields as neuroscience. Another frontier expands our understanding of "the literary" to new forms such as television. With that broadening comes a new formalism that integrates the study of visual technique and serial narrative structure into the study of literature. Another is the dissolution of the distinction between form and matter as well as between culture and nature. The physicality of culture is increasingly difficult to ignore, and because everything about us has meaning in the light of evolution as an adaptation that aided survival, we know that human culture