

[論 文]

## What is Literary Theory ?

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### SUMMARY

This paper deals with two difficult questions: (1) What is literary theory? and (2) What does literary theory do? Literary theory is contrasted to literary criticism, and theory is found to be a more all-embracing, inclusive field than criticism, which is tied more closely to literature itself. Literary theory is shown to be a multitude of differing ways of looking at literature, with each theory yielding differing results.

Like it or hate it, the importance of literary theory is undeniable. At this very moment, literary theory is having a profound impact on the study of literature, on the structures of English departments and on their curriculums. Hand in hand with literary theory's importance is the controversy that it generates. A huge body of writing and many debates have sprung up seemingly overnight. These writings and debates make for the chaotic but also fresh and vital wind swirling around the study of literature.

But first things first. Just what is literary theory? If theory may be roughly defined as an attempt at explanation, literary theory may be said to be an umbrella term for a variety of approaches to literature or ways of viewing literature. Each of these theories yield results with a different emphasis, but each theory tends ultimately to ask what literature is. This "simple" question of asking "what literature is" has had very profound consequences for the study of literature.

Literary criticism and literary theory are two voices that allow literature to "speak". But these two voices operate somewhat differently. Certainly their borders overlap, and criticism and theory share many similarities. Nonetheless, literary criticism tends to confine itself to more practical and less philosophical questions. For example, why did Natsume Soseki choose to write *kokoro* as two first person narratives, and what were the results of that decision? Or, was the character of Teinosuke in *Sasameyuki* in fact a reflection of Tanazaki himself? Literary criticism may even start a debate as to whether Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* has importance as great literature.

For literary criticism, literature is a given. Literary criticism needs literature for its very existence. On the other hand, literary theory is a term that covers a variety of approaches to the study of literature. There are a multitude of ways of viewing literature, each with its own unique perspective, and each method will give results that will be different from results derived from other methods. When we use a particular theory, it

is like putting on a pair of glasses. With these "glasses" (for example Marxism) such things as goods, economy, money, class etc. come into better focus, and such concepts as technique and style tend to blur. The opposite may be said for formalism. We can best *understand* a text when we look at it from a vast number of different perspectives. Each theory that we use adds to the richness of the total picture.

But finally each theory brings us to that subversive question, what is literature? That question opens a whole Pandora's box of problems. Let's lift the lid of that famous box just a bit, and peek inside.

At first it seems absurd to ask what is literature? "Why", you say, "It's just common sense! The *Genji Monogatari* is literature, as are the short stories of Akutagawa and the novels of Kawabata and Oe". But we are children of a modern age born into a time when what seems obvious is undermined by quantum theory, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and the special visual effects of modern cinema.

OK, so it may not be entirely obvious, but we can isolate and define the parts that make literature literature. Look at the haiku of Basho. Surely everyone would agree that his poetry is literature. But as we probe more deeply the water begins to grow murky, and the light not so clear. What if I myself write a haiku? Is that literature? If a computer writes a haiku, is that literature? Is a well written newspaper article literature? When is a historical or psychological work literature or "merely" history and psychology?

Finally, it seems that what counts as literature is what people agree to call literature. But people change over the ages, and what people at one time decide to call literature may not necessarily be what the next age, or even the next generation, thinks of as literature. If we attempt to expand our question further, from what is literature to what is good literature, Pandora's box immediately changes into a huge can of worms.

The vexed question of what is literature has expanded to the point where the term literature has been outmuscled by the term *text*. Now everything can be read as text. A Japan Airlines schedule, a menu at a local *izakaya*, and a *manga* all have equal relevance as text alongside of Murasaki Shikibu and the *Manyosyu*.

And literature is no longer even the dominant force in the humanities. It has to share pride of place with upstarts such as cultural studies, post-modernism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminism: the list goes on and on. All these disciplines influence and are influenced by literature. A cursory look at any college curriculum in the West will tell the same story. Courses such as *Thomas Hardy and his world or 20th century American novelists are being replaced by courses such as American detective pulp fiction, Nigerian post-colonial poetry, and sexual politics in the novels of 20th century feminist British writers*.

These are remarkable changes. In a comparatively short span of time the very foundations of literature and the teaching of literature have been expanded and altered. To see how this has all come about, it is time to look more closely at literary theory and how it has developed throughout the 20th century.

Readers may protest and say: "Why can't we just read a story and enjoy it? Why is

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theory even necessary? Isn't it like tearing off the wings of a beautiful butterfly and then dissecting it in order to find out what makes the butterfly beautiful?" The great novelist and feminist Virginia Woolf takes up this question in her writing. She says that there are two stages of reading. In the first stage we empathize with the writer. We enter their world and see the world through their eyes. We "admire the beauty of the butterfly." But after we finish their work and lay the book down, we must mentally stand back from it. It is time to analyze and judge the work objectively. What were its strengths and weaknesses? How does it compare with other works. Until we do these things, the process of reading is only half complete.

Just as there is no *one correct* way of interpreting a work of art, so there is no one correct literary theory. Theory is a kind of interpretive tool, a way of approaching a text. Theories are not right or wrong, they are methodologies that yield differing results. Some theories yield richer and profounder results than others, depending on the text being studied. A psychological, feminist, or Marxist study of Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* will lead to differing results, some more interesting than others. But it must be remembered that it is impossible to approach a text without any assumptions, knowledge or previous experience. Even not wanting to analyze a text is a kind of theory, a sort of romantic, Rousseau-like primitive assumption that civilization corrupts and the primitive condition is best.

The journey into the shifting sands of literary theory is not an easy one, but the rewards can be greatly satisfying. Along the way you will touch on many new and challenging ways of approaching literature, and when you have finished the journey, you will realize that this particular voyage can never really be completed. There is always another idea, another viewpoint, just beyond the horizon. But during the trip you should develop a more profound understanding of the richness, rewards and difficulty of the question: in what ways can we view a work of literature? This will bring you, by many a winding road, to the ultimate question: what is literature? Each theory that you encounter will give you a different answer. It is this variety of answers and visions that fills out the bare brushstrokes of literature and give it color, depth, perspective and life.

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