



# Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism

## Summary:

This resource will help you begin the process of understanding literary theory and schools of criticism and how they are used in the academy.

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## Introduction

A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different lenses critics use to view and talk about art, literature, and even culture. These different lenses allow critics to consider works of art based on certain assumptions within that school of theory. The different lenses also allow critics to focus on particular aspects of a work they consider important.

For example, if a critic is working with certain Marxist theories, s/he might focus on how the characters in a story interact based on their economic situation. If a critic is working with post-colonial theories, s/he might consider the same story but look at how characters from colonial powers (Britain, France, and even America) treat characters from, say, Africa or the Caribbean. Hopefully, after reading through and working with the resources in this area of the OWL, literary theory will become a little easier to understand and use.

## Disclaimer

Please note that the schools of literary criticism and their explanations included here are by no means the only ways of distinguishing these separate areas of theory. Indeed, many critics use tools from two or more schools in their work. Some would define differently or greatly expand the (very) general statements given here. Our explanations are meant only as starting places for your own investigation into literary theory. We encourage you to use the list of scholars and works provided for each school to further your understanding of these theories.

We also recommend the following secondary sources for study of literary theory:

- *The Critical Tradition: Classical Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 1998, edited by David H. Richter
- *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 1999, by Lois Tyson
- *Beginning Theory*, 2002, by Peter Barry

Although philosophers, critics, educators and authors have been writing about writing since ancient times, contemporary schools of literary theory have cohered from these discussions and now influence how scholars look at and write about literature. The following sections overview these movements in critical theory. Though the timeline below roughly follows a chronological order, we have placed some schools closer together because they are so closely aligned.

## Timeline (most of these overlap)

- Moral Criticism, Dramatic Construction (~360 BC-present)
- Formalism, New Criticism, Neo-Aristotelian Criticism (1930s-present)
- Psychoanalytic Criticism, Jungian Criticism(1930s-present)
- Marxist Criticism (1930s-present)
- Reader-Response Criticism (1960s-present)
- Structuralism/Semiotics (1920s-present)
- Post-Structuralism/Deconstruction (1966-present)
- New Historicism/Cultural Studies (1980s-present)
- Post-Colonial Criticism (1990s-present)
- Feminist Criticism (1960s-present)
- Gender/Queer Studies (1970s-present)
- Critical Race Theory (1970s-present)
- Critical Disability Studies (1990s-present)

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