



**NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA**

**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE**

**COURSE CODE: ENG 415**

**COURSE TITLE: LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**



**ENG 415**

**LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *ENG 415: Literary Theory and Criticism*. It is a three-credit unit course for 400 level students in the Department of English. It comprises 21 study units subdivided into 4 modules. This course seeks to introduce students to some of the most important schools of literary theory and criticism in the 20th Century that have had significant impact on the study of literature. In each unit, we explore the philosophical framework informing the school in question as well as its central tenets and main interpretative strategies. We look in particular for each school's definition of the nature of the relationship between text and reality, the nature of the relationship between the text and its author (the question of authorship); and the nature of the relationship linking literary theories to each other.

Each unit explains the basic principles of the theory it addresses, including the basic principles of literary application, in order to enable students write their own theoretical interpretations of literature and read with insight what the theorists themselves have written. The course in general, demonstrates how critical theories both argue and overlap with one another, sometimes overturning, and sometimes building on the insights of competing theories. By studying a number of literary theories, you are reminded that multiple viewpoints are important if you are to see the whole picture and to grasp the very process of understanding that underlies human experience, thereby increasing your ability to see both the value and the limitations of every method of viewing the world.

This Course Guide gives you an overview of the course. It also provides you with information on the organisation and requirements of the course.

## WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS COURSE

This course carries three credit units. The course guide informs you about what to expect from this course material. Literary Theory and Criticism acquaints you with the different theories of Literature.

## COURSE AIMS

Basically, this course aims at:

- enabling students to grasp some theoretical concepts in literature by relating them to our everyday experience
- explaining to students how to apply theoretical perspectives to literary works
- revealing to students the relationships among theories—their differences, similarities, strengths and weaknesses—by applying them to literary works.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

Each unit of the course also has some set objectives. These will guide you in your study. They are usually stated at the beginning of each unit, and when you are through with studying the units go back and read the objectives. This would help you assimilate the task you have set out to achieve. On completion of the course, you should be able to:

- discuss the emergence of literary theory and criticism
- explain the earliest theorists and critics of literature
- examine the postulations of the various theories of literature
- discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the theories
- apply the theories to the analysis and criticism of works of literature.

## WORKING THROUGH THIS COURSE

To complete the course, you are required to read the study units and other related materials. You will also need to undertake practical exercises for which you need a pen, a notebook, and other materials that will be listed in this guide. The exercises are to aid you in understanding the theories being presented. At the end of the course, you will write a final examination.

## **COURSE MATERIALS**

The major materials you will need for this course are:

- Course Guide
- Study Units
- Textbooks and References
- Assignment File
- Presentation Schedule.

## STUDY UNITS

There are 21 study units structured into 4 modules in this course, as follows:

### **Module 1    An Overview of Literary Theory and Criticism**

- Unit 1        Background to Literary Theory and Criticism
- Unit 2        Literary (Critical) Theory: A Definition
- Unit 3        Literary Theory as a Discipline
- Unit 4        Literary Criticism: A Definition
- Unit 5        Functions of Literary Criticism
- Unit 6        The Relationship between the Literary Critic  
                  and the Writer

### **Module 2    Theories of Literature (1)**

- Unit 1        Mimetic Theory of Arts
- Unit 2        Formalist Theory and Criticism
- Unit 3        New Criticism
- Unit 4        Structuralist Criticism
- Unit 5        Post-Structuralism
- Unit 6        Deconstruction
- Unit 7        Semiotics

### **Module 3    Theories of Literature (2)**



- Unit 1 Marxist Theory and Criticism
- Unit 2 Biographical Criticism
- Unit 3 Historical Criticism
- Unit 4 New Historicism
- Unit 5 Psychoanalytic Theory

#### **Module 4 Theories of Literature (3)**

- Unit 1 Feminist/Gender Criticism
- Unit 2 Reader-Response Theory
- Unit 3 Postcolonial Theory

### **TEXTBOOKS AND REFERENCES**

Many books have been recommended in the course. You may wish to purchase them for further reading.

Abrams, M. H. (1953). *The Mirror and the Lamp*. London: Oxford UP.

Balogun, J. (2011). "Approaches to Modern Literary Theories."  
[www.unilorin.edu.ng/publications/balogun/Doc5.pdf](http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/publications/balogun/Doc5.pdf).

Barry, P. (2009). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press.

Beatty, J. et al. (2002). *The Norton Introduction to Literature*.  
(8th ed.). New York: W.W Norton Company.

- Blamires, H. (1991). *A History of Literary Criticism*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
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- During, S. (Ed). (1999). *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
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- Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
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- Moore-Gilbert, B., Stanton, G, & Maley, W. (Eds.). (1997). *Postcolonial Criticism*. New York: Addison, Wesley, Longman.
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Richter, D. H. (Ed.). (1998). *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Boston: Bedford Books.

Rivkin, J. & Ryan, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge.

## **ASSIGNMENT FILE**

An assignment file and a marking scheme will be made available to you. In this file, you will find all the details of the work you must submit to your tutor for marking. The marks you obtain from these assignments will count towards the final mark you obtain for the course.

## **TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS (TMAs)**

You will need to submit a specified number of the tutor-marked assignments (TMAs). Every unit in this course has a tutor-marked assignment. The total mark for assignments is 30%.

## **FINAL EXAMINATION AND GRADING**

The final examination of **ENG 415** will be of three hours duration. All areas of the course will be examined. Find time to read the unit all over before your examination. The final examination will attract 70% of the total course grade. The examination will consist of questions which reflect the type of self-testing, practice exercises and tutor-marked assignments you have come across in the course. All areas of the course

will be assessed. You are advised to revise the entire course after studying the last unit before you sit for the examination. You will also find it useful to review your tutor-marked assignments before the final examination.

## **PRESENTATION SCHEDULE**

Your course materials have important dates for the early and timely completion and submission of your TMAs and attending tutorials. You are expected to submit all your assignments by the stipulated time and date and guard against falling behind in your work.

<b>COURSE MARKING SCHEDULE</b>	
<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Marks</b>
Assignments 1 – 4	Four assignments, best three marks of the four counts 10% each of the 30% course marks.
End of course examination	70% of overall course marks
<b>Total</b>	<b>100% of course materials.</b>

## **ASSESSMENT**

There are three parts to the course assessment and these include self assessment exercises, tutor-marked assignments and the written examination or end of course examination. It is advisable that you do all the exercises. In tackling the assignments, you are expected to use the information, knowledge and techniques gathered during the course. The assignments must be submitted to your facilitator for formal assessment in line with the deadlines stated in the presentation schedule and assignment file. The work you submit to your tutor for assessment will count for 30% of your total course work. At the end of the course you will need to sit for a final end of course examination of about three hours duration. This examination will count for 70% of your total course mark.

## **HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS COURSE**

In distance learning, the study units replace the university lecturer. This is one of the advantages of distance learning; you can read and work through specially designed study materials at your own pace, and at a time and place that suits you best. Think of it as reading the lecture instead of listening to a lecturer. In the same way that a lecturer might give you some reading to do, the study units tell you when to read your

set books or other materials. Just as a lecturer might give you an in-class exercise, your study units provide exercises for you to do at appropriate points. Each of the study units follows a common format. The first item is an introduction to the subject matter of the unit and how a particular unit is integrated with the other units and the course as a whole. Next is a set of learning objectives. These objectives let you know what you should be able to do by the time you have completed the unit. You should use these objectives to guide your study. When you have finished the units you must go back and check whether you have achieved the objectives. If you make a habit of doing this, you will significantly improve your chances of passing the course. The main body of the unit guides you through the required reading from other sources. This will usually be either from your set books or from your course guides. The following is a practical strategy for working through the course. If you run into trouble, telephone your tutor. Remember that your tutor's job is to help you. When you need assistance, do not hesitate to call and ask your tutor to provide it. Heed the following advice carefully:

1. Read this Course Guide thoroughly; it is your first assignment.
2. Organise a study schedule.
3. Note the time you are expected to spend on each unit and how the assignments relate to the units. Whatever method you choose to use, you should decide on and write your own dates for working on each unit.
4. Once you have created your own study schedule, do everything you can to stick to it. The major reason that students fail is that they get behind with their course work. If you get into difficulties with your schedule, please let your tutor know before it is too late for help.
5. Turn to Unit 1 and read the Introduction and the Objectives for the Unit.
6. Assemble the study materials. Information about what you need for a unit is given at the beginning of each unit. You will almost

always need both the study unit you are working on and one of your set books on your desk at the same time.

7. Work through the unit. The content of the unit itself has been arranged to provide a sequence for you to follow. As you work through the unit, you will be instructed to read sections from your set books or other articles. Use the unit to guide your reading.
8. Review the objectives for each unit to make sure that you have achieved them. If you feel unsure about any of the objectives, review the study material or consult your tutor.
9. When you are confident that you have achieved a unit's objectives, you can then start on the next unit. Proceed unit by unit through the course and try to pace your study so that you keep yourself on schedule.
10. When you have submitted an assignment to your tutor for marking, do not wait for its return before starting on the next unit. Keep to your schedule. Consult your tutor as soon as possible if you have any questions or problems.
11. After completing the last unit, review the course and prepare yourself for the final examination. Check that you have achieved the unit objectives (listed at the beginning of each unit) and the Course Objectives (listed in the Course Guide).
12. Keep in touch with your study centre. Up-to-date course information will be continuously available there.

## **FACILITATORS, TUTORS AND TUTORIALS**

There are eight hours of tutorials provided in support of this course. You will be notified of the dates, times and location of these tutorials, together with the name and phone number of your tutor, as soon as you are allocated a tutorial group. Your tutor will mark and comment on your assignments, keep a close watch on your progress and on any difficulties you might encounter. You must mail your tutor-marked assignments to your tutor well before the due date (at least two working days are required). They will be marked by your tutor and returned to you as soon as possible. Do not hesitate to contact your tutor by telephone, e-mail, or discussion board if you need help. The following might be circumstances in which you would find help necessary. Contact your tutor if you:

- do not understand any part of the study units or the assigned readings
- have difficulty with the self-test exercises
- have a question or problem with assignment, with your tutor's comments on an assignment or with the grading of an assignment.

You should try your best to attend the tutorials. This is the only chance to have face-to-face contact with your tutor and ask questions which are answered instantly. You can raise any problem encountered in the course of your study. To gain the maximum benefit from course tutorials, prepare a question list before attending them. You will learn a lot from participating in discussions actively.

## **SUMMARY**

*ENG 415: Literary Theory and Criticism* introduces you to the major theoretical approaches to the study of literature. This is because the study of literature is no longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems, novels and plays. It is also the study of the ideas, issues, and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. New critical theories emerge as literary scholars develop new methodologies of reading, especially in the arts and humanities. By studying these theories, you would have been provided with a ‘tool kit’ for your own informed critical reading and thought about works of literature. This Course Guide gives you an overview of what to expect in the course of this study.



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## **MODULE 1      AN OVERVIEW OF LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**

Unit 1	Background to Literary Theory and Criticism
Unit 2	Literary (Critical) Theory: A Definition
Unit 3	Literary Theory as a Discipline
Unit 4	Literary Criticism: A Definition
Unit 5	Functions of Literary Criticism
Unit 6	The Relationship between the Literary Critic and the Writer

### **UNIT 1      BACKGROUND TO LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**

#### **CONTENTS**

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2.0	Objectives
3.0	Main Content
	3.1 The Nature of Literary Theory and Criticism
	3.2 Relationship between Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
	3.3 The ‘Complexity’ of Literary Theory and Criticism
4.0	Conclusion
5.0	Summary
6.0	Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0	References/Further Reading

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we are going to undertake a brief overview of the rise and development of literary theory and criticism, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the most significant changes that have occurred in the field of literary theory and criticism is where to locate the locus of meaning in a text. In the discipline of literary criticism, it was originally assumed that meaning resides with the author. Thus, the purpose of interpretation then was to discern the author's intention which would unlock the textual meaning of the work. However, with time, critics began to focus more concertedly on the text itself; hence meaning came to be seen as residing with the reader. By subjecting a work of art to a particular theoretical construct, you can acquire a deeper understanding of the work and a better appreciation of its richness. This unit will enable you grasp the basis of literary theorising and criticism by relating them to your everyday experience. It is also expected that by the end of

the unit, you should be able to apply theoretical perspectives to literary works.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the historical development of literary theory and criticism
- list some of the notable theorists and critics of literature.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Nature of Literary Theory and Criticism

According to Kelly Griffith (2002), prior to the 20th century, the investigation of the nature and value of literature had had a long and distinguished history, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and continuing into modern times with such figures as Sir Philip Sidney, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold. But their investigations focused primarily on evaluation, not interpretation. They explored what literature is and praised or condemned works that failed to meet whichever standards they deemed essential. In *The Republic*, to cite one extreme example, Plato condemned *all* literature because it stirs up the passions—lust, desire, pain, anger—rather than nurtures the intellect.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What was the concern of early investigators on the nature and value of literature?

According to Jide Balogun (2011), the history of literature is the history of literary criticism. The latter as an ally of the former makes creative writing more complementary and helps to conceptualise the pedagogical import of texts of literature into ideological standpoints. Over the ages, literary theories have been the weapons for the realisation of this crucial obligation of literary criticism. For Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory* (1996), the emergence of theory was a 'way of emancipating literary works from the stranglehold of a 'civilised sensibility', and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at least, anyone could participate.' Modern literary theory gradually emerged in Europe during the 19th century and gained momentum in the 20th century. Eagleton argues that theory is the body of ideas and methods used in the practical reading of literature. For him, theories reveal what literature can mean. It is a description of the underlying principles by which we attempt to understand literature. That is to say, all literary interpretation

draws on a basis in theory since it is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What is literary theory and when did modern literary theory emerge in Europe?

### **3.2 Relationship between Literary Theory and Literary Criticism**

Even though modern literary theorising and criticism emerged during the 19th century, both attained greater heights in the 20th century. In fact, the 20th century could be appropriately termed the age of criticism. The richness and the complexity of literary theory can be seen in the many critical movements that sprang up and in the enthusiasm with which many critics practised the art. The impact of the new psychologies was deeply felt in criticism. Marxism, structuralism, formalism, semiology, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and post-colonial critical studies are among the many theories that dominated the century. Among the notable critics of the century include: I.A. Richards, P.R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot, T. E. Hulme, William Empson, Christopher Caudwell, John Crowe, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Ezra Pound, Wayne Booth and Henry James etc.

In the preface to *A History of Literary Criticism* (1991), A. N. Jeffares gives no room for any doubt about the kinship of literature, literary criticism and literary theories. He says:

The study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote. What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background, etc?

All of these are antecedents to the birth of a particular literary production. The argument of Jeffares is that for literature to be on course, it becomes expedient that a structure is put in place to reveal its meaning beyond the literal level. Broadly, texts of literature would possess two levels of meaning - the literal and the super-literal. The super-literal meaning of texts of literature is the ideological implication of the same, which criticism attempts to resolve. The task of resolving the crisis engendered in literary texts is possible through the formulation of some principles, parameters and paradigms which are technically

termed theories. Theories are meant to interpret and evaluate works of literature with the mind of revealing the in-depth implications of such works.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

The structure put in place to reveal the meaning of literary text is literary theory. Explain.

### **3.3 The ‘Complexity’ of Literary Theory and Criticism**

According to Terry Eagleton (2005), there are some students who complain that literary theory is impossibly esoteric; who suspect it as an arcane, elitist enclave somewhat akin to nuclear physics. It is true that a 'literary education' does not exactly encourage analytical thought, but literary theory is in fact no more difficult than many theoretical enquiries and a good deal easier than some.

Some students and critics also protest that literary theory 'gets in between the reader and the work'. The simple response to this is that without some kind of theory, however unreflective and implicit, we would not know what a 'literary work' was in the first place, or how we were to read it. Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and oblivion of one's own.

Tyson Lois (2006), in an attempt to justify the study of literary theory, raises some interesting questions: why should we bother to learn about literary or critical theories? Is it really worth the trouble? Will all the abstract concepts not interfere with one's natural and personal interpretations of literature? These questions, or ones like them, are probably the questions most frequently asked by new students of critical theory, regardless of their age or educational status. Literary theory and criticism offer us new ways of thinking about literature and about what are involved in reading critically.

Literary theory and criticism is an unavoidable part of studying literature. But theory can often be intimidating or else, frankly, boring especially when it takes the form of 'isms'. Literary theory and criticism aim to explain, entertain, stimulate and challenge the student of literature. Literary theory and criticism make literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways. Some of the ways include:

- Literary theory and criticism help us to achieve a better understanding of literature. A better understanding of the world in which we live, automatically, comes along when we study

literature, and the study of critical theory makes that enterprise even more productive.

- Literary theory and criticism can, not only show us our world and ourselves through new and valuable lenses, but also strengthen our ability to think logically, creatively, and with a good deal of insight in analysing works of literature.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss how literary theory and criticism can help readers achieve better understanding of literature.

Finally, and most importantly too, there is in fact no 'literary theory,' in the sense of a body of theory which springs from, or is applicable to, literature alone. None of the theoretical approaches outlined in this course, from Marxism, structuralism and psychoanalysis, is simply concerned with 'literary' writing. On the contrary, they all emerged from other areas of the humanities and have implications well beyond literature itself.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, attempt has been made to provide an overview of the nature and development of literary theory and criticism. You learnt that theories are meant to interpret and evaluate works of literature with the mind of revealing the in-depth implications of such works. It was argued that by subjecting a work of art to a particular theoretical construct, you can acquire a deeper understanding of the work and a better appreciation of its richness. The point was also made that the richness and the complexity of literary theory can be seen in the many critical movements that sprang up and in the enthusiasm with which many critics practised the art.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

This unit undertakes an overview of literary theory and criticism. We stated that literary theory and criticism is an unavoidable part of studying literature. Literary theory and criticism aim to explain, entertain, stimulate and challenge the student of literature. Literary theory and criticism make literature refreshing, informative and stimulating in many ways. Literary theory and criticism help us to achieve a better understanding of literature.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the importance of literary theory to the study of literature.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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- Fish, S. (1989). *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Graff, G. (1987). *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Griffith, K. (2002). *Writing Essays About Literature*. (A Guide and Style Sheet). Thompson Heinle Incorporation.
- Lentricchia, F. (1980). *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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Rice, P. & Waugh, P. (1998). *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Richter, D. H. (Ed.). (1998). *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Boston: Bedford Books.

Rivkin, J. & Ryan, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge.



## UNIT 2 WHAT IS LITERARY (CRITICAL) THEORY?

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- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Meaning and Definition of Literary Theory
  - 3.2 Distinction between Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit provides a general definition of theory and a specific definition of literary theory. It also attempts a distinction between literary theory, literary history and literary criticism.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define theory generally and literary theory in particular
- distinguish between literary theory and literary criticism.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Meaning and Definition of Literary Theory

According to Griffith, before 20th century, there was little systematic attempt to interpret works of literature, to probe their meanings. Griffith further contends that Gerald Graff, in *Professing Literature* (1987), his book on the history of literary studies in higher education, noted that before then there was a widespread "assumption that great literature was essentially self-interpreting and needed no elaborate interpretation." But as knowledge increases, there was a shift in attitude to the methods of literary theorising. In fact, by the end of the 19th century, universities began to include courses in modern literature, and teachers and writers began to give serious attention to interpreting literature.

In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (1999), Jonathan Culler defines literary theory generally as "the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it." Culler further says that:

One of the most dismaying features of theory today is that it is endless. It is not something that you could learn so as to 'know theory.' It is an unbounded corpus of writings which is always being augmented as the young and the restless, in critiques of the guiding conceptions of their elders, promote the contributions to theory of new thinkers and rediscover the work of older, neglected ones.

In his book, *An Essay on Criticism* (1966), Graham Hough distinguishes two categories of literary theories. The first category he calls the extrinsic theories and is concerned with the moral nature of literature. Theories in this category primarily emphasise the total essence of literature. The second category is what he describes as the intrinsic theories, which talk about the formal nature of literature and more specifically what it is.

The intrinsically inclined criticism is a heterodiegetic judgment of literature. This kind of literary theory isolates a work of literature from its external reality. The adherents of this classification see a text of literature as having no relationship intended or implied with its external world. That such a work is in its own 'world'. The critical theorists in this category are the Formalists, Structuralists and Post-structuralists or the Deconstructionists.

On the other hand, the extrinsically inspired literary theories tend to associate a literary piece with its external world. Here, there is a departure from the isolationist philosophy propounded by the ideologues of the intrinsically inclined criticism. Rather, the extrinsic criticism is homodiegetic meaning that a work of literature is essentially (i) a representation of the spirit of the age and (ii) a reflection of the 'world' in which it operates. It goes further to see a text of literature as a product of the producer's (poet, novelist, playwright and essayist) imagination, vision and sensibility in his/her external world. Also, in this kind of criticism, the artist does not only focus on his external reality but he/she is inside the literary production and creates a principal character and other characters to carry out his mission. The focus in this respect is for criticism to holistically investigate a piece of literature with the mind of having a more practical judgment of the same. Modern literary theories in this category are Psychological or Psychoanalytical, Marxist, Feminist and Post-colonialist criticism.

Generally, a theory is a body of rules or principles used to appraise works of literature. And on the other hand, literary theory (critical

theory), tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the importance of theory to the study of literature.

### 3.2 Distinction between Literary Theory and Literary Criticism

Literary theory is a site of many theories. Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read literary texts. The proponents of each theory believe their theory is *the* theory, but most of us interpret texts according to the "rules" of several different theories at a time. All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts. There is nothing to say that one is better than another or that you should read according to any of them, but it is sometimes fun to "decide" to read a text with one in mind because you often end up with a whole new perspective on your reading. To study literary theory is to seek to understand exactly how readers (critics) interpret (criticise) texts, especially literary ones. Most scholars today would agree that there is no single meaning waiting to be simply *found* in any text. Meaning is, rather, *produced*, that is, it is a function of the different interpretative strategies which various readers bring to bear upon a text. Thus, a cardinal rule of modern literary criticism could be summed up as follows: *the 'answers' you get from a text depend entirely upon the kind of 'questions' you put to it.* Strictly speaking, when we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism, but when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation rests, we are applying literary theory. In other words, literary criticism is the application of critical theory to a literary text, whether or not a given critic is aware of the theoretical assumptions informing his or her interpretation. In fact, the widespread recognition that literary criticism cannot be separated from the theoretical assumptions on which it is based is one reason why the word *criticism* is often used as if it includes the word *theory*.

Literary history, on its part, is the academic discipline which defined how literature was taught and studied from the 1890s onwards. As a discipline, it grounds its scientific and social legitimacy in the positivist history of the late 19th century. As a historical genre concerned with the method of establishing facts, it extends the application of the reliable tools of classical and medieval philology to modern literature. Literary history relates literature to the social, political, moral, and intellectual life of a nation, personality or period. Literary history is not expected to reduce works of literature to archival documents, but to generate a

proper evaluative discourse and explain why certain works, which we call classics, still affect us and become, so to speak, immortal, while others do not survive their own times, etc.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

How is literary theory different from literary criticism?

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we defined the terms 'theory' and 'literary theory'. We said that while a theory is a body of rules or principles used to appraise works of literature, literary theory on the other hand is "the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it."

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

This unit defined a theory as a body of rules or principles used to appraise works of literature, while literary theory (critical theory), on its own, tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest. We also made a distinction between literary theory and literary criticism. We said that when we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism, but when we examine the criteria upon which our interpretation of a text rests, we are applying literary theory.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the importance of theory to the study of literature.

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## UNIT 3 WHY STUDY LITERARY THEORY?

### CONTENTS

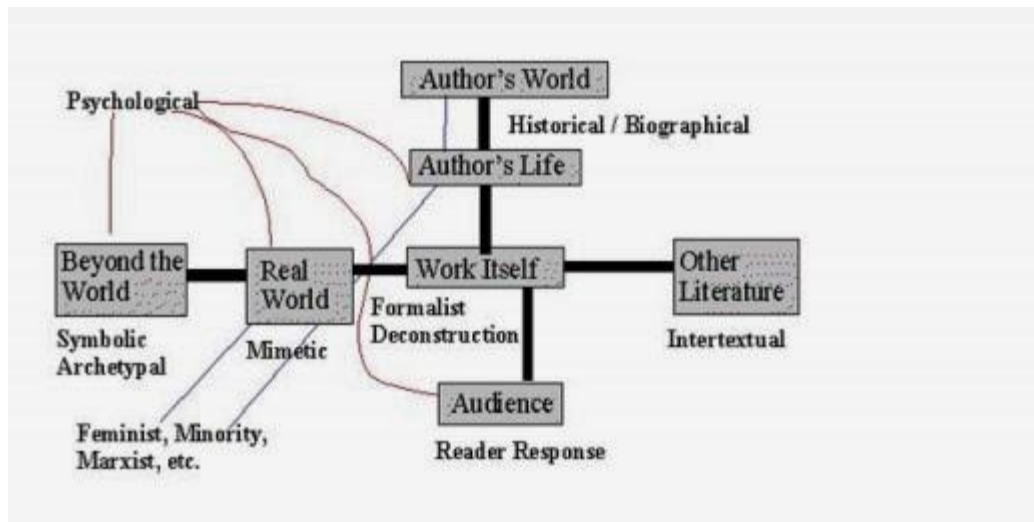
- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objective
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Why Study Literary Theory?
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

As we explained in the last unit, the term ‘literary theory’ within the discipline of literary studies, can be best understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts. Essentially, theory in literature refers to the ways of looking at literature beyond the typical plot-theme and character-setting studies. Jonathan Culler (1997) in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* holds that theory in literature refers to the principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations. M. H. Abrams points out in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) that “any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of four elements.” These elements are:

1. The work itself
2. The artist who creates the work
3. The universe or the nature that is being imitated by the work
4. The audience of the work.

These elements are diagrammatically shown below:



Literary theory, Abrams holds, can be divided into four categories: mimetic theories, which focus on the relationship between text and universe (by "universe" he means all things of the world apart from audience, text and author); pragmatic theories, which are interested in the relationship between text and audience; expressive theories, which are concerned with the text-author relationship; and objective theories, the most recent classification, which focus on analysis of the text in isolation. Because nothing exists other than universe, text, author and audience, any form of theory must fit into one of these four categories, or be a combination of several. For Abrams, there are author-based theories, reader-based theories, text-based theories, and theories that propose the text as imitative of the universe. For instance, when Chinua Achebe argues that Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* fails to grant full humanity to the Africans it portrays, he was arguing from the perspective of post-colonial literary theory which emphasises a history of exploitation and racism. In an attempt to provide a pointed meaning of 'theory' in literature, Jide Balogun contends that:

The task of resolving the crisis engendered in literary texts is possible through the formulation of some principles, parameters and paradigms which are technically termed theories. Theories are meant to interpret and evaluate works of literature with the mind of revealing the in-depth implications of such works.

This unit explains why the study of literary theory and criticism is invaluable.



## **2.0 OBJECTIVE**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the importance of the study of literary theory and criticism in literature.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Why Study Literary Theory?**

Literary theory and literary criticism are interpretive tools that help us think more deeply and insightfully about the literature that we read. Literary theory, specifically, refers to the set of principles evolved for the evaluation of works of literature. Over time, different schools of literary criticism have developed, each with its own approaches to the act of reading. It is important that students study literary theory and criticism because both offer different ways of interpreting works of literature. Each theory offers itself as the most (or the only) accurate means of understanding human experience. In many instances, advocates of the most popular theories of the day usually receive the acclamation and respect. However, even within the ranks of any given critical theory there are countless disagreements among practitioners that result in the emergence of different schools of thought within a single theory. In fact, the history of every literary theory is, in effect, the history of an ongoing debate among its own advocates as well as an ongoing debate with the advocates of other theories. Thus, literary theory and criticism will help you in “thinking theoretically,” that is, to seeing the assumptions, whether stated or not, that underlie every viewpoint.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Explain how both literary theory and criticism offer different ways of understanding a literary text.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

We have explained in this unit that literary theory refers to a particular form of literary criticism in which particular academic, scientific, or philosophical approach is followed in a systematic fashion while analysing literary texts. In other words, literary theorists adapt systems of knowledge developed largely outside the realm of literary studies (for instance, philosophy or sociology) and impose them upon literary texts for the purpose of discovering or developing new and unique

understandings of those texts. From the foregoing, we have established that literary theory is an indispensable tool which critics use to realise the goal of sensitising and educating the audience. That, by implication, suggests that the difficulty often encountered in a literary text is often resolved by subjecting it to a particular theoretical analysis, using the framework of a particular theory.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you learnt that literary theory refers to a set of principles evolved for the evaluation of works of literature. This unit also stated that literary theory is an indispensable tool which critics use to realise the goal of sensitising and educating the reading audience. This, by implication, suggests that the difficulty often encountered in a literary text is often resolved by subjecting it to a particular theoretical analysis, using the framework of a particular theory.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

The history of every critical theory is, in effect, the history of an ongoing debate among its own advocates as well as an ongoing debate with the advocates of other theories. Discuss.

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## UNIT 4 LITERARY CRITICISM: A DEFINITION

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objective
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Nature and Meaning of Literary Criticism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

A brief explanation of a few important concepts is useful in this unit. The terms *critic* and *literary criticism* do not necessarily imply finding fault with literary works. Literary criticism, by and large, tries to explain the literary work to us: its production, its meaning, its design, its beauty. Critics tend to find flaws in one another's interpretations more than in literary works. Unlike movie critics and book reviewers, who tell us whether or not we should watch the films or read the books they review, literary critics spend much more time explaining than evaluating, even when their official purpose, like that of the Formalist (or New Critics) is to assess the aesthetic quality of the literary work. Of course, when we apply critical theories that involve a desire to change the world for the better—such as feminism, Marxism, lesbian/gay/queer criticism, and postcolonial criticism—we will sometimes find a literary work flawed in terms of its deliberate or inadvertent promotion of, for example, sexist, classist, racist, heterosexist, or colonialist values. But even in these cases, the flawed work has value because we can use it to understand how these repressive ideologies operate.

Since the era of Plato and Aristotle, philosophers, scholars and writers have tried to create a more precise and disciplined ways of analysing literature. Literary criticism flourished in Europe and America with such literary giants like I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis as the fore-runners. Even in contemporary criticism, both men are still very much recognised and respected. In fact, Richards and Leavis were the theoreticians of literature for several decades. They were the doyens of critical thought in Europe and America.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVE

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the importance of literary criticism to the study of literature.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Nature and Meaning of Literary Criticism

According to the *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2006), ‘to criticise’, etymologically, means ‘to analyse’ and later, ‘to judge’. Critical theory in itself can be distinguished from criticism, since it concerns itself with the formulation of concepts. It is a philosophical activity which should underlie criticism but, again, should not be regarded as part of it. Literary theory refers to a set of principles evolved for the evaluation of works of literature. There is no single approach to the criticism of literature. Criticism is a formal discourse, and there are so many approaches to it, yet these approaches are not exhaustive but represent the most widely used contemporary approaches.

Literary criticism refers to the analysis and judgment of works of literature. It tries to interpret specific works of literature and also helps us to identify and understand different ways of examining and interpreting them. The study of literary criticism contributes to maintenance of high standards of literature. In our day-to-day life, the study of criticism of literary works enables us to become aware of the present and past works of literature. Criticism also enables writers to understand the factors that affect the quality and character of literary works and in this way improve their ability to produce better works. Literary criticism allows us to see things from different perspectives. It allows us to gain a far wider insight into a work of literature than from our own perspective. That way, we gain a greater understanding of the world in which we live.

In addition, literary criticism helps readers develop critical thinking skills. Literary criticism is not an abstract intellectual exercise. It is a natural human response to literature. The discipline of literary criticism is nothing more than discourse-spoken or written-about literature. It is a by-product of the reading process.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the importance of literary criticism to the study of literature.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you learnt the definition of literary criticism as well as the importance of literary criticism to the study of literature. The critic analyses and evaluates what a writer has written. He comments on and evaluates the quality of both the author's literary composition and his vision of or insight into human experience.

### 5.0 SUMMARY

We also stated that there is no single approach to the criticism of literature. In addition, we stated that a literary critic approaches a work according to established codes, doctrines or aesthetic principles. He is a mediator between the work and the reading public. He can arouse enthusiasm in the reader and can as well kill that enthusiasm.

### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. What is literary criticism?
2. Discuss the role of the literary critic.

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## UNIT 5      FUNCTIONS OF LITERARY CRITICISM

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Functions of Literary Criticism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the last unit, we stated that ‘to criticise’, etymologically, meant ‘to analyse’ and later, ‘to judge’. Literary criticism offers new ways of thinking about literature and about what is involved in reading critically. In this unit, we shall attempt to identify the functions of criticism to the understanding of literary texts.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- state the functions of criticism in the study of literature
- apply the paradigms discussed in your own critical writings.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Functions of Literary Criticism

To study literary criticism is to seek to understand exactly how readers (critics) interpret (criticise) texts, especially literary ones. Most scholars today would agree that there is no single meaning waiting to be simply *found* in any text. Meaning is, rather, *produced*; that is, it is a function of the different interpretative strategies which various readers bring to bear upon a text. A cardinal rule of modern literary criticism may be summed up as follows: *the ‘answers’ you get from a text depend entirely upon the kind of ‘questions’ you put to it.* The upshot of all this is that the same text legitimately means different things to different people. As a result, for example, a Marxist critic would necessarily come up with a different interpretation from that of a Psychoanalytic critic of the same text, each of which is equally valid (provided that there is textual evidence to support the interpretation in question). The primary necessity for literary criticism lies in the fact that “new strategies of



interpretation of literature are constantly being developed to cope with the complexities of change in literary traditions”.

The importance of literary criticism therefore resides in its secondary but invaluable role of interpretation. Criticism deals with analysing, classifying, expounding and evaluating a work of art in order to form one’s opinion. Serious literary criticism is both evaluative and analytical, thereby helping us to better a literary work. Writing on the role of literary criticism, I.A. Richards notes that “the critical reading of poetry (prose and drama) is an arduous discipline. The lesson of all criticism is that we have nothing to rely upon in making our choices, but ourselves.”

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What does serious literary criticism do?

Literary criticism begins the very moment you close the book and begins to reflect on what has been read. Thus, criticism includes the process of reflecting on, organising and articulating your response to a given literary work. Criticism presupposes that a piece of literature contains relationships and patterns of meaning that the critic can discern and share after reading a text. It also presupposes that the critic has the ability to translate his experience of the work into intellectual terms that can be communicated to and understood by others. Again, literary criticism presupposes that the critic’s experience of the work once organised and articulated, will be compatible with the experience of other readers. This means that to be valid and valuable, the critic’s reading of a work must accord, at least in some ways, with what other intelligent readers, over a reasonable period of time are willing to agree on and accept.

In conclusion, as a student of literary criticism, some of the questions to ask include:

- Am I reading a literary text in order to measure how accurate its representation of reality is?
- Am I reading a literary text for insights into the life and mind of its writer?
- As the reader, is my role passive or active?
- Is meaning simply ‘found’ in a literary text or is it ‘constructed’ or ‘produced’ by the reader?

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Try to recall what you have learnt after putting your course material aside.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you learnt that to study literary criticism is to seek to understand exactly how readers (critics) interpret (criticise) texts, especially literary ones. By now, you should have understood that meaning in a literary text is *produced*; that is, it is a function of the different interpretative strategies which various readers bring to bear upon a text.

### 5.0 SUMMARY

Literary criticism deals with analysing, classifying, expounding and evaluating a work of art in order to form one's opinion. A cardinal rule of modern literary criticism may be summed up as follows: *the 'answers' you get from a text depend entirely upon the kind of 'questions' you put to it.* This implies that the same text legitimately means different things to different people. As a result, for example, a Marxist critic would necessarily come up with a different interpretation from that of a Psychoanalytic critic of the same text, each of which is equally valid (provided that there is textual evidence to support the interpretation in question).

### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. What is literary criticism?
2. Discuss the role of the literary critic.

### 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 6 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LITERARY CRITIC AND THE WRITER

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Relationship between the Literary Critic and the  
Writer
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism takes the reader to a higher level of cognitive thought by evaluating what the critic says, and then applying it to the piece of literature in ways that the reader may not have originally thought.

The literary critic is concerned with what the writer has tried to say in his work and how successful he has been able to express it. For instance, the formalist critic is interested in *how* an author expresses an idea, while the Marxist critic is interested in *what* an author is trying to express. To a certain degree, a literary critic should be conversant with literary history to be able to make a genuine judgement upon a work of literature. He should be aware of what others have said and must be grounded in literary theory. It is important to note that literary critics have borrowed from other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, linguistics, psychology and philosophy to analyse works of literature more perceptively.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the role of the critic
- discuss the relationship between the literary critic and the writer.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Relationship between the Literary Critic and the Writer

The literary critic gives life to a literary text by bringing out the hidden meanings embedded in the work. Most often, it is through the eyes of the cautious critical reader that we evaluate the success or otherwise of a text. The critic analyses and evaluates what a writer has written. He comments on, and evaluates the quality of both the author's literary composition and his vision of, or insight into human experience. It should be noted that a critic does not prescribe which realities are valid, but identifies the nature of the individual experience and the aesthetic means used to express that experience. The underlying implication is that it is not the task of the critic to set up or frame prescriptions which writers must conform to. A literary critic approaches a work according to established codes, doctrines or aesthetic principles. He is a mediator between the work and the reading public. He can arouse enthusiasm in the reader and can as well kill that enthusiasm.

Generally, despite their tendency to interpret, rather than to evaluate literature, literary critics have an enormous effect on the literary marketplace, not in terms of what they say about particular works but in terms of which works they choose to interpret and which works they ignore. And of course, critics tend to interpret works that lend themselves readily to the critical theory they employ. Thus, whenever a single critical theory dominates literary studies, those works that lend themselves well to that theory will be considered "great works" and will be taught in the college classroom, while other works will be ignored.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the role of the literary critic.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you learnt that the literary critic is concerned with what the writer has tried to say in his work and how successful he has been able to express it. For instance, the formalist critic is interested in *how* an author expresses an idea, while the Marxist critic is interested in *what* an author is trying to express. You also learnt that to a certain degree, a literary critic should be conversant with literary history to be able to make a genuine judgement upon a work of literature.

### 5.0 SUMMARY

A literary critic should be aware of what others have said and must be grounded in literary theory. Literary critics have borrowed from other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, linguistics, psychology and philosophy to analyse works of literature more perceptively.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

What is the relationship between the literary critic and the writer?

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## **MODULE 2                      THEORIES OF LITERATURE (1)**

Unit 1	Mimetic Theory of Arts
Unit 2	Formalist Theory and Criticism
Unit 3	New Criticism
Unit 4	Structuralist Criticism
Unit 5	Semiotics
Unit 6	Post-Structuralism
Unit 7	Deconstruction

### **UNIT 1      MIMETIC THEORY OF ARTS**

#### **CONTENTS**

1.0	Introduction
2.0	Objectives
3.0	Main Content
3.1	Origin and Background of the Mimetic Theory of Literature
3.2	Central Tenets of the Mimetic Theory
3.3	A Critique of the Mimetic Theory of Art
4.0	Conclusion
5.0	Summary
6.0	Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0	References/Further Reading

#### **1.0      INTRODUCTION**

The mimetic theory of arts was among the first to be defined. It originated from Aristotle's (384 BC-322BC) conception that art imitates, reproduces or recreates great and low actions. Here, great actions refer to tragedy, and low actions refer to comedy. The mimetic theory is also known as 'Art as Imitation'. Mimesis, the Greek word for imitation, has been a central term in aesthetic and literary theory since Plato. It is the earlier way to judge any work of art in relation to reality, whether the representation is accurate or not. Though this mode starts from Plato, it runs through many great theorists of Renaissance up to some modern theorists as well. M. H. Abrams defines imitation as a relational term- signifying two items and correspondence between them. Mimesis is the idea that art imitates reality, an idea that traces back to Aristotle who argued that the universal can be found in the concrete. Mimesis is developed and applied through mimetic theories of literature, theatre and the visual arts during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods. Philosophers and writers including Aristotle, Plato, Moliere, Shakespeare, Racine, Diderot and Rousseau applied the mimetic theory



of literary criticism to their work and lives. The mimetic theory is the universal foundation of literature and of schools of literary criticism. The concern for the moral effects of art is often drawn from mimetic theory. The goal of mimetic criticism is to determine how well a work of literature connects with the real world. Mimetic criticism also argues that art conveys universal truths instead of just temporal and individual truths.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the postulations of the mimetic theory of literature
- critique the postulations of the mimetic theory of Art.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 Origin and Background of the Mimetic Theory of Literature

The Greek mimetic school of criticism is based upon the ideas expressed by Plato and Aristotle. Plato regards the artist as an imitator of imitations; the painter's work is thrice removed from the "essential nature" of a thing: the artist imitates the physical object, which is a faint copy of ideas of the thing. Plato claims that ordinary art affects badly on the audience because it represents imagination rather than truth, and nourishes their feeling rather than reason. Plato opines that artists lack creative power. Art is essentially mimicry of nature. Paintings are supposed to look "just like the real thing" etc. Arguably, it is the oldest and most widely held view on the nature of art. Plato believed that art is essentially an imitation of nature. Therefore, according to Plato, art is at best:

- (1) useless; and
- (2) potentially dangerous.

Plato is convinced that "the arts" form a natural grouping and that they all share a common form: "That which all and only Arts have in common by virtue of which we recognise each to be an art and by virtue of which each is an art." For him, art was useless because it serves no useful purpose in society. As an "Imitation of Nature", it adds no knowledge (no *intellectual* value).

Aristotle, on the other hand, treats imitation as a basic human faculty, which expresses itself in a wide range of arts. For him, to imitate is not to produce a copy or mirror reflection of some things but involves a

complex mediation of reality. For example, in tragedy the writer imitates people's actions rather than their characters. For him, this world is real but incomplete so poet endeavours to complete it through the imitation. Thus, poets are both imitators and creator.

### 3.2 Central Tenets of the Mimetic Theory of Literature

Aristotle, the proponent of the mimetic theory of art, holds that art imitates the reality existing in us and in the concrete objects around us. However, it should be noted that art does not merely imitate the flux and confusion that confront man; rather it imitates the necessary or probable consequences of given persons in given situations-even of imaginary persons and situations.

Drama for instance, imitates men in action. According to Aristotle, mimesis is men in action, their characters, deeds, passions, and experiences while poetic imitation is an imitation of the human inner action. Indeed, the main thrust of mimesis is that certain poems simply tell what happens and others (drama) actually imitate what happens. The artist, that is, imitates reality by suppressing accidental irrelevances and by heightening the essential which is otherwise only imperfectly realised in concrete objects.

Mimetic critics ask how well the work of literature accords with the real world. They analyse the accuracy of a literary work and its morality. They consider whether or not it shows how people really act, and whether or not it is correct. The mimetic critic assesses a literary work through the prism of his or her own time, judging the text according to his own value system.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, also known as "On the Art of Imitation", is an important text on the study of art as imitation. Mimesis is concerned primarily with the object imitated or reproduced and also the medium of imitation.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

- i. Briefly explain the mimetic theory of literature.
- ii. Discuss the major propositions of the mimetic theory of literature.

### 3.3 A Critique of the Mimetic Theory of Art

One of the major criticisms levelled against the mimetic theory of art is that it fails to recognise the importance of imagination in literary creativity. Also, the negative side of mimetic criticism occurs when the critic's subjective bias leads to dogmatic condemnation and censorship. Many works otherwise labelled aesthetically great have been blacklisted, banned or burned throughout the history of humankind by moral critics.

For Plato, Art was potentially dangerous for several reasons:

A) Art is essentially deceptive: the whole aim of art was to deceive. Success was achieved when the spectator mistook an imitation for reality. Furthermore, artists were unconcerned with facts/truth. It made no difference to artists or to the success of their works whether the images or stories they depict were real or their messages were true or good.

B) Art is psychologically de-stabilising: human existence is, in great part, a struggle to master the emotions and sensual urges by using reason and intellect according to Plato. Therefore art was dangerous and counterproductive to this end (i.e. rational self-mastery) since it appeals not to reason and intellect, but to the psychological forces which constantly try to overthrow reason, namely passion and emotion. For him, "Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind is ever to increase in happiness and virtue"

C) Art leads to immorality. Art is unconcerned with morality, sometimes even teaching immoral lessons. Morality, it would seem, has nothing to do with a work's success as art. Plato worries that such art would encourage immorality in the citizens of the state. People might uncritically accept and admire immoral, vicious traits when they are attractively packaged by skilled artists (distinction between truth and illusion/ physicians and cooks/ heath and cosmetics/ beauty and glamour). Like a skilled chef, artists are only interested in pleasing the palate, even if it poisons the dinner. Since mimetic art is institutionally divorced from truth, goodness or any concern with 'real' beauty, it creates an environment of superficial "flavours" where all sorts of atrocities can be made to seem a tempting confection.

D) Art was politically dangerous, a threat to the common good. Similar to the point made earlier, Plato worried that strong art which appeals to emotions stirs up negative emotions which society tries to control. But this is more than just a problem for the individual. For people with a history of "mania," strong, emotion-stirring art is rightly seen as a threat to the good of state/community. It was, therefore correctly the concern of government. For Plato, violence and sex in the media is capable of causing us to be more violent, or entrench sexually obsessed culture. This affects not just the people who consume the violent images, but the entire community of which they are a part.

However, Aristotle, who was Plato's most famous student and greatest critic, had a dissenting view. Disagreeing with much else that Plato said, Aristotle agreed that art was essentially a Mimesis. But, he maintained, (good) art was neither useless nor dangerous, but rather natural and beneficial. It is natural because it is natural for human beings to imitate. Any human society which is healthy will be a society where there is imitative art. Nothing is more natural than for children to pretend. Art production and training is a necessary part of any education since it uses and encourages the imaginative manipulation of ideas. Nothing is more natural than for human beings to create using their imagination.

Furthermore, Aristotle holds that art is not deceptive because artists must accurately portray reality to be successful. Drama, for instance, must accurately portray psychological reality in order for characters to be believable and their actions understandable. Again, art teaches effectively and it teaches the truth. Convincing and powerful drama is convincing and powerful because it reveals some truth of human nature. Aristotle agreed that art did stir up negative emotions but, he claims it then purged these in a harmless, healthy way through what he calls the doctrine of "Catharsis".

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Mimetic theory comes from the Greek word "mimesis," which means imitation and representation, and it states that people are influenced by each other and the world around them, when creating, in many different ways. Since Plato applied the mimetic theory on literature and separated it from narrative, mimesis has been given a very clear literary meaning. Plato sees the artist as an imitator of the physical world around him, which, according to him, is already an imitation of the idea people have of this world. So basically he claims that a writer imitates the imitations and represents imagination and emotion much more than reason and reality. For this reason, according to Plato, mimesis affects the readers negatively by misleading them.

Aristotle disagrees with Plato in the sense that for him to imitate the physical world is not just to copy it but rather to adapt it. According to Aristotle's reception of the mimetic theory, imitation is needed to complete this incomplete physical world people live in. But imitation, as he sees it, is rather a complex creation, a skill that needs to go hand-in-hand with talent and imaginative power.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

The mimetic theory of arts was the first to be defined. It originated from Aristotle's conception that art imitates, reproduces or recreates great and low actions. Here, great actions refer to tragedy and low actions refer to comedy. The mimetic theory is also known as 'Art as Imitation'.

In this unit, we stated that Aristotle, the proponent of the mimetic theory of art, holds that art imitates the reality existing in us and in the concrete objects around us. Aristotle's *Poetics*, also known as "On the Art of Imitation", is an important text on the study of art as imitation. Mimesis is concerned primarily with the object imitated or reproduced and also the medium of imitation.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Attempt a critique of the Mimetic Theory of Art as espoused by Plato and Aristotle.

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## UNIT 2      FORMALIST THEORY AND CRITICISM

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Origin of Formalism
  - 3.2 Basic Principles and Main Interpretative Strategies of Formalism
  - 3.3 Criticisms against Formalism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Formalism is a branch of the ‘theory of art for art’s sake’. Formalist theory regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms. It holds that literature should assert its autonomy devoid of ethics or politics. In their influential book entitled *Theory of Literature* (1973), Rene Wellek and Austin Warren hold that "the natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves." To a formalist, therefore, a poem or story is not primarily a social, historical, or biographical document; it is a literary work that can be understood only by reference to its intrinsic literary features, that is, those elements found in the text itself. To analyse a poem or story, therefore, the formalist critic focuses on the words of the text rather than facts about the author's life or the historical milieu in which it was written. The critic pays special attention to the formal features of the text—the style, structure, imagery, tone, and genre.

These features, however, are usually not examined in isolation, because formalist critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all its elements work together to create the reader's total experience. Art for art’s sake is a movement that appeals to a pure aesthetic element of form.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the development of formalist theory
- discuss the theoretical assumptions of formalism
- examine the criticisms against formalist theory and criticism.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 Origin of Formalism

Formalism originated in Russia in 1915 with the founding of the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* and in the following year, 1916, of its St.

Petersburg counterpart, *Opojaz Muskovites*. The major actors in this critical school include: Victor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Eikhenbaum, Osip Brik, Yury Tynyanav and Vadimir Propp. Formalism as a critical perspective began by rejecting the unsystematic and eclectic critical approaches which had previously dominated literary study. It attempted to create a 'literary science' by paying attention to the study of poetic language.

### 3.2 Basic Principles and Main Interpretative Strategies of Formalism

Formalism or Russian formalism, as it is also called, is a 20th-century phenomenon. The formalist approach to literature pays close and careful attention to the language, form, and structure of literary texts, while regarding individual texts as the principal object of critical investigation. To the formalists, the meaning of literary texts resides primarily in the texts themselves rather than in anything else. Literature has to be seen or read in special ways because style, form, and technique play roles in literary texts that are different from the roles they play in ordinary discursive texts. For formalism, literary criticism is seen to be a specialised art, and literary texts are to be interpreted according to certain well-defined and objective criteria rather than simply according to the impressionistic and subjective response of the individual critic.



**SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Formalists pay attention to three aspects of literary text. What are they?

Formalism involves the rejection and consequent reversal of the traditional relation between form and content; literary and non-literary language, and literary text and reality. Formalist critics are concerned with the study of poetic language which they think can reveal the 'literariness' of a work. By literariness is meant that which makes a given work a literary work. Formalism places emphasis on basic elements of texts which are literary in character. This allows it to emphasise the differences between literary language and non-literary or ordinary language. Jakobson and his other formalist critics were primarily linguists who were interested in extending the field of linguistics to cover poetic language. They were concerned with establishing a coherent theoretical basis for literary studies. It is the goal of formalism to make the study of literature an autonomous and specific discipline, to shift attention from the poet to poetry itself.

Formalist theory rigorously and systematically excludes the non-literary from the purely literary. The sources and genesis of particular works, author's biography, history, politics, philosophy, etc. are thoroughly excluded from literary analysis. Literature has an independent existence, and formalism attempts to create an independent science which studies specifically literary material.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What is the goal of formalism?

Formalism excludes all mimetic and expressive definitions of literature. For formalists, literature is not seen as the expression of an author's personality and world-vision, or as a realistic (mimetic) representation of the world in which he lived. This is because in reading the literary text as an instrument of expression or representation, the specificity of its literary qualities is likely to be overlooked. Formalism emphasises the independent existence of literary studies.

Formalism holds that literature is different from all other materials because it tends to defamiliarise objects; that is, make things strange. It refreshes our sense of life and experience. Art defamiliarises things that have become habitual or automatic. The familiar is made strange in art. Practical everyday language is made strange in poetry

because the effect of poetry is to make language 'oblique, 'difficult,' 'attenuated' or 'tortuous'.

Even the physical sounds of words themselves become unusually prominent. This defamiliarised perception of words, which in ordinary circumstances we fail to notice is the result of the formal basis of poetry. Formalists believe that poetic speech does not differ from ordinary speech just because it may include construction different from everyday language and word-order inversions, but because its formal devices (rhyme and rhythm) act on ordinary words to renew our perception of them.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What does "defamiliarisation" mean to formalists?

### **3.3 A Critique of Formalism**

A lot of criticisms have been levelled against the formalist theory of art. For instance, it does not assign any significance to the author, the world outside, or even thought. No recognition is given to the relation between text and reality which are key elements in some other critical theories. For the formalists, literature has nothing to do with vision or with authorial meaning. A given work of art is only part of the general body of literature, not a part of the personality of its author. Formalist critics tell us that the emphasis in practical language is on the referent and the reality referred to. Every other thing, such as rhyme or alliteration, is only secondary to the purpose of the communication. But in poetic language, referentiality is irrelevant, and the emphasis is on the means of expression itself. Because of this, a poetic utterance has no functionalities with the real context in which it is produced and cannot be assumed to refer to any aspect of its producer's existence.

Language in poetry does not point to an object beyond itself. It is entirely self-sufficient and autonomous. What is important is not the author, but literariness. Literature does not refer to anything in the world of reality; it does not reflect that world. Indeed, literary texts make familiar things to become strange. It dislocates our habitual perceptions of the real world so as to make it the object of a renewed attention. Formalism unearths the formal mechanisms whereby this effect of defamiliarisation is produced. Shklovsky argued that literature creates a "vision" of the object instead of serving as a means of knowing it. In poetry, the devices of poetry are studied not for themselves, but for their capacity to make objects strange. Imagery, hyperbole, parallelism comparison, and repetition all bring about

defamiliarisation.

Another critique against formalist critical theory is that it does not recognise the traditional dichotomy between Form and Content. It is interested only in Form. Traditionally, form was considered to be a kind of 'decorative supplement' while content is the thought or idea. Form was considered to be a vessel into which content could be poured. This same form was thought capable of receiving a variety of different contents. If the form changed, it was at the instance of content. The emphasis was put on content. Formalist theory reversed the priority of content over form and exclusively promoted the importance of form over content. Content then becomes dependent on form. Content does not have any separate from independent existence in literature. No amount of literary analysis can distil content from form. Form itself is determined, not by content, but by mother forms. Form predetermines content.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the major criticisms against formalist critics.

With the rise of Marxism in Russia in the 1930s, formalism was driven out of literary discourse in Stalinist USSR; hence the formalists see Marxist critics as their literary or ideological enemies. The formalist theory that literature is a special realm to be (distinguished from the social and political world) clearly stands in direct opposition to the Marxist belief that literature cannot be understood apart from its historical context. Because of its emphasis on structure or language, formalism has inspired or given rise to other language-based theories of literary criticism. One of such critical perspectives is Structuralism, which will be examined in subsequent unit.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you learnt that formalist criticism developed and flourished in Russia in the middle of the 20th century. To the formalists, a work of literature is perceived as being autotelic in the sense that such is “self-complete, written for its own sake, and unified by its form”. Jerome Beaty *et al.* (2002). The interpretation of this is that form (methods, devices, etc.) used to present ideas in a work of literature is exalted more than content (theme). From the Formalist’s standpoint, a work of literature is evaluated on the basis of its literary devices and the susceptibility of the same to scientific investigation. The critic’s concern therefore is to identify and discuss those devices in order to determine the ‘literariness’ of such a text (Jide Balogun, 2011).

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have been taught that formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms. Formalist critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all its elements work together to create the reader's total experience. A key method that formalists use to explore the intense relationships within a poem is close reading, a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text. The purpose of close reading is to understand how various elements in a literary text work together to shape its effects on the reader. Writing about the shortcoming of formalist criticism, Jide Balogun opines that the critical practice of the Formalists needs a further appraisal because of its loss of the organic essence of literature. This is so because a work of literature is a representation of a central idea or theme whose interpretation is dependent on the different elements that contribute to its fulfilment and meaning. It would not be possible for Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) to accomplish the enormous task of satirising the bastardisation and commercialisation of the Christian faith if only the image of the Lagos Bar Beach has been emphasised in the text without exposing the gullibility of Prophet Jero and the idiotic character of Amope. A focus only on this aspect of a text is a mere pursuance of shadow at the expense of substance.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the major concerns of the formalist critics.
2. List some of the allegations levelled against formalism.

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## UNIT 3 NEW CRITICISM

### CONTENTS

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- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Emergence of New Criticism
  - 3.2 Main Interpretative Strategies of New Criticism
- 4.0 Conclusion
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

New Criticism is a product of some American universities in the 1930s and 40s. It stresses a close reading of the text itself. As a strategy of reading, New Criticism views the work of literature as an aesthetic object independent of historical context and as a unified whole that reflects the unified sensibility of the artist. New Criticism aims at bringing a greater intellectual rigour to literary studies, confining itself to careful scrutiny of the text alone and the formal structures of paradox, ambiguity, irony, and metaphor, among others. The New Critics are fired by the conviction that their readings of poetry would yield a humanising influence on readers and thus counter the alienating tendencies of modern, industrial life. In *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson (2006) submits that New Criticism dominated literary studies from the 1940s through the 1960s and has left a lasting imprint on the way we read and write about literature. Some of its most important concepts concerning the nature and importance of textual evidence—the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations—have been incorporated into the way most literary critics today, regardless of their theoretical persuasion, support their readings of literature. For the New Critics, thorough textual support is needed for literary interpretations.

To fully appreciate New Criticism's contribution to literary studies today, we need to remember the form of criticism it replaced: the biographical-historical criticism that dominated literary studies in the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th. At that time, it was common practice to interpret a literary text by studying the author's life and times to determine *authorial intention*, that is, the meaning the author intended the text to have. The author's letters, diaries and essays were combed for evidence of authorial intention as were autobiographies, biographies and history books. In its most extreme

form, biographical-historical criticism seemed, to some, to examine the text's biographical-historical context *instead* of examining the text. In America, the New Critics called their literary interpretation "close reading."

In this unit, you are going to learn some of New Criticism's contributions to literary studies and the theoretical framework that underlies their interpretation. Some other theories like reader-response criticism and structuralism stand in opposition to New Criticism.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the development of New Criticism
- discuss the theoretical postulations of New Criticism
- discuss the strengths and shortcomings of New Criticism.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Emergence of New Criticism

Kelly Griffith (2002) notes that New Criticism is a product of the rise of Modernism and one of 20th century's first theories about interpreting literature. Although New Criticism began well before World War II, with the criticism of T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, it received its fullest expression after the war by such critics as John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

The term *New Criticism* comes from the title of a book published by John Crowe Ransom in 1941, *The New Criticism*. Ransom surveyed the work of new critics, making clear some of his own critical principles. Other critics who agreed with Ransom came to be called the New Critics. The New Critics broke dramatically with the 19th century emphasis on historical and biographical background. They held that understanding and appreciating a work of literature need have little or no connection with the author's intended meanings, with the author's life, or with the social and historical circumstances that may have influenced the author. Everything the reader needs to understand and appreciate a work is contained within the work itself.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

How is John Crowe Ransom significant to the theory of New criticism?

### 3.2 Main Interpretative Strategies of New Criticism

The New Critics see their method as "scientific." The work is a self-contained phenomenon made up of "physical" qualities—language and literary conventions (rhyme, meter, alliteration, plot, point of view, and the like). These qualities can be studied in the same way a geologist studies a rock formation or a physicist the fragmentation of light particles. But some New Critics, like Cleanth Brooks, claimed that the meaning contained in works of literature cannot be paraphrased, cannot be separated from the work's form. One can state what a work is "about" or summarise a work's themes, but a work's meaning is far more complex than such statements alone. Brooks argued that a work's complexity lies in its "irony" or paradoxes. A *paradox* is a statement that seems contradictory, but it is nonetheless true. Statements such as "the first shall be last" or "you must lose your life to gain it" are paradoxes. Brooks claimed that good works of literature are filled with paradoxes.

The New Critics use their theories about literature to judge the quality of works of literature. A "good" work, they believe, should contain a network of paradoxes so complex that no mere summary of the work can do them justice; yet, a good work should also have unity. The author, they argue, achieves this unity by balancing and harmonising the conflicting ideas in the work. Everything in the work is meaningfully linked together. Because the New Critics favour complex, yet unified, works, they downgrade works that seem simple or those that lack unity. They preferred "difficult" works that contain apparently illogical and troubling material. They prefer works that stay away from social and historical subject matter and that deal rather with private, personal and emotional experience.

The New Critics believe that the language of great works of literature should be accessible to modern readers. They are confident that well-trained interpreters could analyse, understand and evaluate works of literature. Since to them great literature is one of civilisation's proudest achievements, they imbue literary criticism with a noble, even priestly, quality. Their method of analysing literature—using literary elements to reveal artistry and meaning—was easy to understand and even "democratic" as anyone could appreciate and interpret great literature once they learned how. Finally, their method excuses interpreters from having to master biographical and historical background. They believe that all that is needed is a careful and thorough scrutiny of the works themselves.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

- i. Why do New Critics "adore" complex works?



- ii. As a student of literary theory, you should study "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy," two influential New Critical essays by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. They are contained in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954). Another stimulating work of New Criticism is Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947).

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

For the New Critics, readers must focus attention on the literary work as the sole source of evidence for interpreting it. The life and times of the author and the spirit of the age in which he or she lived are certainly of interest to the literary historian, New Critics argue, but they do not provide the literary critic with information that can be used to analyse the text itself. According to the New Critics, knowing an author's intention, therefore, tells us nothing about the text itself; hence, they coined the term *intentional fallacy* to refer to the mistaken belief that the author's intention is the same as the text's meaning. Although the author's intention or the reader's response is sometimes mentioned in New Critics' readings of literary texts, neither one is the focus of analysis. Rather, the only way we can know if a given author's intention or a given reader's interpretation actually represents the text's meaning is to carefully examine, or "closely read," all the evidence provided by the language of the text itself: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterisation, plot, and so forth, which, because they form, or shape, the literary work are called its formal elements.

As is evident today, the success of New Criticism in that it has focused our attention on the formal elements of the text and on their relationship to the meaning of the text. This is evident in the way we study literature today, regardless of our theoretical perspective. For whatever theoretical framework we use to interpret a text, we always support our interpretation with concrete evidence from the text that usually includes attention to formal elements, to produce an interpretation that conveys some sense of the text as a unified whole.

Ironically, however, New Criticism's gift to critical theory—its focus on the text itself—was responsible for its downfall. New Criticism was eclipsed in the late 1960s by the growing interest, among almost all other schools of critical theory, in the ideological content of literary texts and the ways in which that content both reflects and influences society, an interest that could not be served by the New Critical insistence on analysing the text as an isolated aesthetic object with a single meaning.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

As you have read in this unit, for the New Critics, a literary work is a timeless, autonomous (self-sufficient) verbal object. Readers and readings may change, but the literary text stays the same. Its meaning is as objective as its physical existence on the page, for it is constructed of words placed in a specific relationship to one another—specific words placed in a specific order—and this one-of-a-kind relationship creates a complex of meaning that cannot be reproduced by any other combination of words. For the New Critics, the meaning of a poem could not be explained simply by paraphrasing it, or translating it into everyday language. You should remember that since New Critics believe their interpretations are based solely on the context created by the text and the language provided by the text, they call their critical practice *intrinsic criticism*, to denote that New Criticism stays within the confines of the text itself.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Why do New Critics refer to their critical practice as “intrinsic criticism”?

In contrast, other forms of criticism that employ psychological, sociological, or philosophical frameworks—in other words, all criticism other than their own—they call *extrinsic criticism* because they go outside the literary text for the tools needed to interpret them. New Critics also call their approach *objective criticism* because their focus on each text’s own formal elements ensures, they claim, that each text—each object being interpreted— would itself dictate how it would be interpreted.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the concept of “close reading” as used by the New Critics.
2. In what ways are the New Critics similar to the Formalists?

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## UNIT 4     **STRUCTURALIST THEORY**

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Emergence of Structuralism
  - 3.2 Principles and Postulations of Structuralist Theory
  - 3.3 Applying Structuralist Theory to Literary Works
  - 3.4 Critique of Structuralism
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- 5.0 Summary
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In literary studies, structuralism is concerned with an analysis of texts based on some linguistic principles. It is an intellectual movement that made significant contributions not only to literary criticism but also to philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history. Structuralist literary critics, such as Roland Barthes, read texts as an interrelated system of signs that refer to one another rather than to an external “meaning” that is fixed, either by the author or reader. Structuralist literary theory draws on the work of the Russian formalists, as well as the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and C. S. Peirce. According to Lois Tyson (2006), in literature, one is not engaged in structuralist activity if one describes the structure of a short story to interpret what the work means or evaluate, whether or not it is good literature. However, one is engaged in structuralist activity if one examines the structure of a large number of short stories to discover the underlying principles that govern their composition. For example, principles of narrative progression (the order in which plot events occur) or of characterization (the functions each character performs in relation to the narrative as a whole). You are also engaged in structuralist activity if you describe the structure of a single literary work to discover how its composition demonstrates the underlying principles of a given structural system. In other words, structuralists are not interested in individual buildings or individual literary works (or individual phenomena of any kind) except in terms of what those individual items can tell us about the structures that underlie and organise all items of that kind. This is because structuralism sees itself as a human science whose effort is to understand, in a systematic way, the fundamental structures that underlie all human experience and, therefore, all human behaviour and production. Structuralism should not be thought of as a field of study. Rather, it is a method of systematising

human experience that is used in many different fields of study: for example, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary studies.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the theoretical postulations of structuralism
- apply structuralist principles to the analysis of literary works.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 The Emergence of Structuralism

According to Kelly Griffith (2002), by the 1950s and 1960s, *New Criticism* had become the dominant theoretical approach that guided teaching and interpretation. Although structuralism shared some of the methods of *New Criticism* — notably an emphasis on close reading and attention to the particularities of the text — it was diametrically opposed to it in fundamental ways and took the teaching and interpretation of literature in an entirely new direction. Structuralism is a mid-20th century critical movement based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the cultural theories of Claude Levi-Straus. Ferdinand de Saussure contends that language is a self-contained system of signs, while Levi-Straus holds that cultures, like languages, could be viewed as systems of signs and could be analysed in terms of the structural relations among their elements. Literary structuralism views literary texts as systems of interlocking signs and seeks in a scientific way the rules and codes that govern the form and content of all literature. In *Structuralist Anthropology* (1972), Levi-Strauss holds that human activity and its products, including religion, social conventions, ritual, art and philosophy, are artificial constructions and not natural. They are all elements of a structure. They derive their meanings not from the world of reality, but from their relationship to each other within a sign system which sustains our perception of reality. The world, like language, is made up of signs.

The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, postulates that language is a self-contained system or signs which did not have any logical relation with what it refers to in material or metaphysical planes. He made a distinction between the signifier and the thing signified. In his *Course de Linguistik* (translated *Course in General Linguistics*) (1916), Saussure holds that language is a structured social system that was coherent, orderly and susceptible to understanding and

explanation as a whole. He goes on to add that language could be viewed *synchronically*, that is, as it exists at any particular time, or *diachronically*, that is, as it changes in the course of time. He also makes use of two significant terms, *parole*, by which he means the speech of the individual person, and *langue*, the complete or collective language (such as Yoruba or English) as it is used at any particular time. According to Saussure, the proper object of linguistic study is not the individual utterance (*parole*), but language, the distinct system of signs. In his conception, language is a system of contrasts, distinctions and ultimately opposition since the elements of language never exist in isolation, but always in relation to one another. This became the basis of his synchronic view of language.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Discuss the contributions of structuralism to the study of literature.

### 3.2 Principles and Postulations of Structuralist Criticism

The structuralist literary theory is intimately linked with structural linguistics, drawing a parallel between the study of literature and that of language. The notions of *sign*, *system*, and *part-whole* relationship became dominant features of the artistic and criticism of literature. In this way, the basic tenets of structural linguistics were fully appropriated into literary analysis by scholars who were attracted by Saussure's discoveries. Seen from the doctrine of structuralism, literature, like language, is comprehended as a system governed by specific structural laws. A piece of literature is held to be a functional structure whose individual elements can only be comprehended in their relation to the whole. Literary structuralism views literary texts as systems of interlocking signs, and signs are language based.

Structuralist analysis seeks to make explicit, in a scientific way, the logic that governs the form and content of all literatures. Structuralist critical theory is based on Saussurean language systems. Literature is seen as a sub-system of signs which derives its livelihood from the ever-complete large system of (language) signs. Literature is just one way in which language is used; it is the equivalent of *parole* within the *langue*. Indeed, every manifestation of social activities like dress-making, smoking, dancing, love making, history, sociology or cooking, constitutes languages. Early in the 20th century, Saussure taught three innovative courses in linguistics. His students pooled their notes and published a reconstruction of the courses called *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) as earlier mentioned. This

work is the basis of Saussure's fame and provides the theoretical underpinning of both structuralism and post-structuralism. Saussure's key points about the nature of language broke new ground for studying literature.

First, a language is a complete, self-contained system and deserves to be studied as such. Before Saussure, linguists investigated the history of languages (how languages evolved and changed through time) and the differences among languages. For this kind of study, Saussure coined the word *diachronic* (literally "through time"). Saussure argued that, instead of history of a language, linguists should also study how it functions in the present, how its parts interrelate to make up a whole system of communication. This kind of study Saussure called *synchronic* ("at the same time"). Second, Saussure claimed that a language is a system of signs. He defined a *sign* as consisting of a sound plus the thing the sound represents. He called the sound the *signifier* and the thing represented the *signified*. Third, Saussure said that the sounds that make up a language system are arbitrary. Any sound, it does not matter which one, could represent a given thing. The sound for the concept "tree" varies from language to language, yet it is conventional. Fourth, any given language is self-contained. The signs that make up a language have no meaning outside the system of that language. Finally, Saussure distinguished between the whole system, which he called *langue* (French for "language"), and one person's use of the system, which he called *parole* (French for "word" or "speech"). *Langue* consists of everything that makes the system work, such as words, syntax, and inflections. *Parole* consists of these same elements but with variations from user to user. Each speaker of a language uses the same system but does so in a slightly different way.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

State Saussure's key points about nature of language.

In the 1930s and 1940s, literary critics in Europe began applying Saussure's ideas and methods to the study of literature. This application took two different but often merging paths: literary criticism and cultural criticism. A term that describes both kinds of criticism is semiotics, the systematic study of signs. Structuralist literary critics attempt to show that literature is a form of language or that it functions like language. These critics see the individual work of literature as similar to *parole*, and literary genres or literature in general as similar to *langue*. Just as linguists study instances of *parole* in order to understand *langue*, literary critics study works of literature in order to understand the system of signs that make up a genre or literature as a whole.



One kind of structuralist literary criticism is **stylistics**, the study of the linguistic form of texts. Stylistics can deal with both prose and poetry, but has dealt mainly with poetry, particularly with the qualities of language that distinguish poetry from prose. Some stylistic critics claim that it is only qualities of language that distinguish poetry from prose. By analysing individual poems, these critics attempt to identify those qualities. Structuralists who study entire cultures attempt to understand a culture's sign systems. The most prominent practitioner of this kind of criticism, as we noted earlier, is the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss claims that a culture is bound together by systems of signs, and that these systems are like language. He uses Saussurean linguistics as a way of describing the "grammar" of these systems. All aspects of a culture - technology, religion, tools, industry, food, ornaments, and rituals - form sign systems. The people of the culture are unaware of these systems; thus the structural anthropologist's task is to bring them to light. Levi-Strauss is perhaps best known for his study of myth. He examines multiple versions of individual myths in order to isolate their essential structural units. Although Levi-Strauss applies his theories to the study of local cultures, other critics, like the Frenchman Roland Barthes, use Levi-Strauss's approach to "psychoanalyse" modern society. They look for the unconscious sign systems that underlie all aspects of Western culture, including food, furniture, cars, buildings, clothing fashions, business, advertising, and popular entertainment.

Structuralist analysis of culture and literature often merge because literature can be considered an artifact of culture. Literature is a system of signs that can be studied for itself and for its place in a given culture. As a result, structuralist critics often shy away from complex and classic works and focus instead on popular literature. Structuralist critics are also usually more interested in fitting a work within a culture or a tradition than in understanding the work itself.

Because of the close affinity between Formalism and Structuralism, many of the formalist critics made significant contributions to the theories of fiction and narrative. Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, A.J. Grehmas and even the linguist Noam Chomsky are foremost structuralists. The formalists, Victor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp, made extensive comments on Russian folktales and the nature of narrative structure.

In *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Propp deals with ways in which social and behavioural structures influence and determine fictional narrative. Propp devises a system of folktale based on the two concepts of the roles filled by the characters and the functions that they perform in the plot. He demonstrates that there are a predictable and

finite number of permutations of the rule-function relation. This is comparable to Jakobson's division between the syntagmatic axis of language and its paradigmatic axis.

### 3.3 Applying Structuralist Criticism to Literary Works

As a student of literature, structuralism has very important implications. After all, literature is a verbal art: it is composed of language. So its relation to the “master” structure, language, is very direct. In addition, structuralists believe that the structuring mechanisms of the human mind are the means by which we make sense out of chaos, and literature is a fundamental means by which human beings explain the world to themselves, that is, make sense out of chaos. Thus, there seems to be a rather powerful parallel between literature as a field of study and structuralism as a method of analysis. Literary structuralism attempts to define, explain and analyse literature by concentrating on signs in a given text. This means that there is only a thin line of demarcation between structuralism and semiotics – the science of signs. According to Saussure quoted in Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (1996), language is:

A system of signs, which was to be studied ‘synchronically’, that is to say, studied as a complete system at a given point of time, rather than ‘diachronically’, in its historical development. Each sign was to be seen as being made up of a ‘signifier’ (second image, or its graphic equivalent) and a ‘signified’ (the concept of meaning).

Literary structuralism is an attempt to apply the above linguistic paradigm to the study of literature. The term connotes structures and is more concerned with the way elements relate with one another in a literary production. The focus of this approach is to analyse deep structures in a given literary text. It sees issues in such a text in relation to the signs employed by a writer. Thus, “structuralism focuses on the text as an independent aesthetic object and also tends to detach literature from history and social and political implications” (Jerome Beaty, 2002).

Structuralists do not try to determine whether or not a literary text constitutes great literature. Their focus is on the structural systems that underlie and generate literary meaning. For students of literature, structuralism has very important implications. After all, literature is a verbal art: it is composed of language. Hence its relation to the “master” structure, language, is very direct. In addition, structuralists believe that

the structuring mechanisms of the human mind are the means by which we make sense out of chaos, and literature is a fundamental means by which human beings explain the world to themselves, that is, make sense out of chaos. Thus, there seems to be a rather powerful parallel between literature as a field of study and structuralism as a method of analysis.

Furthermore, structuralist criticism deals mainly with narratives. This focus is not as narrow as it may seem at first glance; if we remember that narrative includes a long history and broad range of texts, from the simple myths and folk tales of the ancient oral tradition to the complex melange of written forms found in the postmodern novel. In addition, most drama and a good deal of poetry, though not classified as narrative, nevertheless have a narrative dimension in that they tell a story of some sort. In any event, narratives provide fertile ground for structuralist criticism because, despite their range of forms, narratives share certain structural features, such as plot, setting, and character. It is important, however, to bear in mind that structuralism does not attempt to interpret what individual texts mean or even whether or not a given text is good literature. Issues of interpretation and literary quality are in the domain of surface phenomena, the domain of *parole*. Structuralism seeks instead the *langue* of literary texts, the structure that allows texts to make meaning, often referred to as a *grammar* because it governs the rules by which fundamental literary elements are identified (for example, the hero, the damsel in distress, and the villain) and combined (for example, the hero tries to save the damsel in distress from the villain).

In general, structuralism is not interested in what a text means, but in *how* a text means what it means. After all, structuralism believes that the structures we perceive in literature, as in everything else, are projections of the structures of human consciousness. The final goal of structuralism is to understand the underlying structure of human experience, which exists at the level of *langue*, whether we are examining the structures of literature or speculating on the relationship between the structures of literature and the structures of human consciousness.

### **3.4 Critique of Structuralism**

Despite being laudable and science-based, one of the shortcomings of structuralism is that literature transcends mere analysis of signs. Literature would not achieve its purpose of expressing those fundamental and socio-cultural human desires that have passed through history, if all it preoccupies itself with is an analysis of signs.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

According to Eagleton (1996), structuralism, as the term suggests, is concerned with structures, and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work. Literary structuralism flourished in the 1960s as an attempt to apply to literature the methods and insights of the founder of modern structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure viewed language as a system of signs, which was to be studied 'synchronically'; that is to say, studied as a complete system at a given point in time, rather than 'diachronically', in its historical development. Each sign is to be seen as being made up of a 'signifier' (a sound-image, or its graphic equivalent), and a 'signified' (the concept or meaning). For instance, the three black marks *c*, *a* and *t* constitute a signifier which evokes the signified 'cat' in an English mind. The relation between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one: there is no inherent reason why these three marks should mean 'cat', other than cultural and historical convention. Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from the others. 'Cat' has meaning not 'in itself', but because it is not 'cap' or 'cad' or 'bat'. It does not matter how the signifier alters, as long as it preserves its difference from all the other signifiers; you can pronounce it in many different accents as long as this difference is maintained. 'In the linguistic system,' says Saussure, 'there are only differences': meaning is not mysteriously immanent in a sign, but it is functional, the result of its difference from other signs. Finally, Saussure believes that linguistics would get into a hopeless mess if it concerns itself with actual speech or *parole* as he calls it. He is not interested in investigating what people actually say; he is concerned with the objective structure of signs which made their speech possible in the first place, and this he called *langue*. Neither was Saussure concerned with the real objects which people speak about: in order to study language effectively, the referents of the signs, the things they actually denote, have to be placed in brackets.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that structuralism in general is an attempt to apply linguistic theory to the study of literature. As Eagleton notes, you can view a myth, wrestling match, system of tribal kinship, restaurant menu or oil painting as a system of signs and a structuralist analysis will try to isolate the underlying set of laws by which these signs are combined into meanings. It will largely ignore what the signs actually 'say', and concentrate instead on their internal relations to one another. Structuralism, as Fredric Jameson puts it, is an attempt "to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics."

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Language is the basis of structuralist criticism. Discuss.

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## UNIT 5 SEMIOTICS

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- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Central Concerns of Semiotic Analysis
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Simply put, semiotics is the science of signs. As a literary theory, semiology proposes that a great diversity of our human action and productions, our bodily postures and gestures, the social rituals we perform, the clothes we wear, the meals we serve, the buildings we inhabit—all convey "shared" meanings to members of a particular culture, and so can be analysed as signs which function in diverse kinds of signifying systems.

Linguistics (the study of verbal signs and structures) is one branch of semiotics that supplies the basic methods and terms which are used in the study of all other social sign systems. This unit examines the theoretical postulations of semiotic analysis. Semioticians apply structuralist insights to the study of what it calls sign systems. A *sign system* is a linguistic or non-linguistic object or behaviour (or collection of objects or behaviours) that can be analysed as if it were a specialised language. In other words, semiotics examines the ways linguistic and non-linguistic objects and behaviours operate symbolically to "tell" us something. In terms of literary analysis, semiotics is interested in literary conventions: the rules, literary devices, and formal elements that constitute literary structures. Semiotics recognises language as the most fundamental and important sign system.

While structural linguistics see linguistic sign as a union of signifier (sound image) and signified (concept to which the signifier refers), semiotics expands the signifier to include objects, gestures, activities, sounds, images—in short, anything that can be perceived by the senses. Clearly, semiotics gives the signifier a wide range of possibilities. However, of the three recognised classes of signs—index, icon, and symbol—semiotics limits its study to signs that function as symbols.

Among the major figures of this theory include Charles Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, Umberto Eco, Gerard Genette, and Roland Barthes.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the concerns of semiotic analysis
- apply semiotics in the analysis of literary texts.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### 3.1 Central Concerns of Semiotic Analysis

'Semiotics', or 'semiology', as we mentioned above means the systematic study of signs. Semiotics deals with the study of signs: their production and communication, their systematic grouping in languages or codes, and their social function. It is relevant to the study of literature, because literature uses language, the primary sign system in human culture, and is further organised through various subsidiary codes, such as generic conventions. The American founder of semiotics, the philosopher C. S. Peirce, distinguished between three basic kinds of sign. These are:

1. The 'iconic', where the sign somehow resembled what it stood for (a photograph of a person, for example).
2. The 'indexical', in which the sign is somehow, associated with what it is, for instance, a sign of smoke with fire or spots with measles).
3. The 'symbolic', where the sign is only arbitrarily or conventionally linked with its referent.

Semiotics takes up this and many other classifications: it distinguishes between 'denotation' (what the sign stands for) and 'connotation' (other signs associated with it); between codes (the rule-governed structures which produce meanings) and the messages transmitted by them; between the 'paradigmatic' (a whole class of signs which may stand in for one another) and the 'syntagmatic' (where signs are coupled together with each other in a 'chain').

Further, semiotics speaks of 'metalanguages', where one sign-system denotes another sign-system (the relation between literary criticism and literature, for instance); 'polysemic' signs which have more than one meaning, and a great many other technical concepts. One of the leading



semioticians is Yury Lotman. To a large extent, structuralism and semiotics, as they impinged on literary studies, are often indistinguishable, especially when semiotics concentrated on the production of meaning rather than its communication.

Semiotics is central to structuralist linguistics, hence [Saussure, from the structuralist](#) and constructionalist approach, defined semiotics as 'the science of signs' with the purpose of understanding systematic regularities from which meaning is derived. Saussure treated [language](#) as a sign-system, and his work in [linguistics](#) supplied the concepts and methods that semioticians apply to sign-systems other than language. One such basic semiotic concept is Saussure's distinction between the two inseparable components of a sign: 'the signifier', which in language is a set of speech sounds or marks on a page, and 'the signified', which is the concept or idea behind the sign. Saussure also distinguished [parole](#), or actual individual utterances, from [langue](#), the underlying system of conventions that makes such utterances understandable; it is this underlying *langue* that most interests semioticians.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Briefly explain the basic concerns of semiotics.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you learnt that 'semiotics', or 'semiology', means the systematic study of signs. Semiotics deals with the study of signs: their production and communication, their systematic grouping in languages or codes, and their social function. It includes the study of how meaning is constructed and understood. For semioticians, signs do not just 'convey' meanings, but constitute a medium in which meanings are constructed. Semiotics helps us to realise that meaning is not passively absorbed but arises only in the active process of interpretation.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, you learnt that semiotics is central to structuralist linguistics, hence [Saussure, from the structuralist](#) and constructionalist approach, defined semiotics as 'the science of signs' with the purpose of understanding systematic regularities from which meaning is derived. Saussure treated [language](#) as a sign-system, and his work in [linguistics](#) supplied the concepts and methods that semioticians apply to sign-systems other than language.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the contributions of C. S. Peirce to the study of semiotics.

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## **UNIT 6 POST-STRUCTURALISM**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Emergence of Post-structuralism
  - 3.2 Major Postulations of Post-structuralism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Like structuralism, post-structuralism is based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and draws extensively from the Deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida. Post-structuralism is centered on the idea that language is inherently unreliable and does not possess absolute meaning in itself. All meanings, post-structuralism avers, reside in "intertextuality, or the relationship of the text to past and future texts" (Merriam, 1995). Intertextuality means that every text is absorbed and transformed by previous and future texts. Derrida postulates that "every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts by the systematic play of differences" (Derrida, 1973). In both post-structuralism and deconstruction, there is no single correct reading of a text as interpretations can go on almost interminably, one conflicting with the other.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define post-structuralism
- discuss the major postulations of post-structuralism.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Emergence of Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism, according to Kelly Griffith (2002) evolved from Saussure's theories of language. It accepts Saussure's analysis of language and uses his methodology to examine the language of literary works, but it concerns itself with the relationship between language and meaning. Post-structuralism, in fact, offers a radical theory of reading that altogether rejects the certainty of meaning. The most influential post-structuralist critic is the Frenchman Jacques Derrida. Others include the works of the French historian Michel Foucault, the writings of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and of the feminist philosopher and critic Julia Kristeva.

The basis of Derrida's radical skepticism is Saussure's distinction between *signifier* and *signified*. Theorists of language have long maintained that words (signifiers) represent identifiable objects (the signified). The word *tree* represents the object "tree." But Saussure questioned the pervasiveness of such one-to-one correspondences. Words, he said, refer not to objects but to "concepts," which are expressed by other words. It seems possible, then, that language, or at least parts of language, may not refer to anything in the sensuously apprehensible world. Saussure said that language is a self-contained system and that in order to function it does not need to reflect reality; it needs only to reflect itself. Signs gain meaning from other signs in the system, not necessarily from the real world.

Derrida and other post-structuralist critics conclude from Saussure's theories that there is a "gap" between signifier and signified. This gap blurs the meaning of the signifier so that we cannot know exactly what it refers to. The resulting ambiguity is multiplied by the connection of signifier to signifier in an endless chain, no part of which touches the real world. A literary text is equivalent to just such a chain. It is a self-contained system that exists independently from the real world. As we read, we absorb this system with our consciousness, which Derrida maintains is itself made up of language. Reading is the confrontation of one language system (our consciousness) with another (the text). Recovering meaning from texts, then, is impossible because interpretations of a text never point to the real world but only to more language. Our interaction with the text makes us think we are moving toward meaning, but we never get there.

### 3.2 Major Postulations of Post-structuralism

Post-structuralist critics are concerned with the relationship between self and language and the culture embodied in it. Both structuralism and post-structuralism are founded on the Saussurean principle that language must be considered at the synchronic plane, that is, within a single temporal plane. Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault are the chief exponents of post-structuralism. Derrida argues that meaning is conceived as existing independently of the language in which it is communicated and that is not subject to the play of language. Derrida's concepts of 'logocentrism' and 'difference' help to show how his argument is an advancement of the structuralist position.

Logocentrism is used to describe all forms of thought which base themselves on some external points of reference, such as the notion of truth. It is generally held that language is subservient to things and ideas in the world. But Derrida says that it is language that gives meaning and coherence to ideas and things, and not vice-versa. In Saussurean linguistic theory, language is primary, and meaning is the product of language. The second concept, 'difference', refers to the fact that any element or language relates to other elements in a text and the fact that it is distinct from them. The meaning of an element is never fully present because it depends on its association with other elements to which it refers. At the same time, its existence as an element depends on its being, distinct from other elements.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What is *logocentricism* and how does it relate to Derrida's position on language?

Like in formalism and structuralism, post-structuralism accepts the primacy of the text. There is nothing outside the text. Derrida's theory insists that if language in general is not governed by anything outside it, then individual literary texts are not governed by anything outside them. The purpose of post-structuralist criticism is to expose the indeterminacy of meaning in texts. Derrida calls his critical method "deconstruction". To "deconstruct" a work, the critic analyses the text—especially its language—to show that whatever connection may seem to exist between the text and the real world is an illusion created by the author's clever manipulation of language. Whatever the author may have intended the work to mean or whatever a reader may think it means is always undercut by the ambiguity of the work's language. The gap between signifier and signified is symptomatic of a "space" of emptiness, nothingness, nonmeaning that lies at the heart of every text. The

critic attempts to demonstrate that the presence of this space makes the text an "abyss" of limitless and contradictory meanings.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the impacts of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida to the theory of deconstruction.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we discussed post-structuralism. We noted that while structuralism believes in the explanation of all phenomena through the science of signs, post-structuralism objects to this position. The argument of the post-structuralist is that meaning is not entirely contained in a sign but rather in a chain of related issues within which signs function. The purpose of post-structuralist criticism is to expose the indeterminacy of meaning in texts. Derrida calls his critical method deconstruction. To "deconstruct" a work, the critic analyses the text—especially its language—to show that whatever connection may seem to exist between the text and the real world is an illusion created by the author's clever manipulation of language.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

Post-structuralism is based on the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and draws extensively from the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida. The theory is centred on the idea that language is inherently unreliable and does not possess absolute meaning in itself. All meanings, post-structuralism avers, reside in "inter-textuality or the relationship of the text to past and future texts". Intertextuality means that every text is absorbed and transformed by previous and future texts. Derrida postulates that "every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts by the systematic play of differences". In both post-structuralism and deconstruction, there is no single correct reading of a text as interpretations can go on almost interminably, one conflicting with the other.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Explain in detail Jacques Derrida's concept of inter-textuality.
2. Compare and contrast structuralism and post-structuralism.

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## UNIT 7 DECONSTRUCTION

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  - 3.2 Theoretical Postulations of Deconstructionist Criticism
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction, as a theory of literature, rejects the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality. According to deconstructionists, language is a fundamentally unstable medium; hence, literary texts which are made up of words have no fixed and single meaning. According to Paul de Man, deconstructionists “insist on the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual signs coincide with what is signified.” Since they believe that literature cannot adequately and definitely express its subject matter, deconstructionists tend to shift their attention away from *what* is being said to *how* language is being used in a text. In many ways, deconstructionist criticism shares certain tenets with formalism since both methods usually involve close reading.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Why do deconstructionists believe that literature cannot adequately and definitely express its subject matter?

As a theoretical concept, deconstruction, according to Lois Tyson (2006), has a good deal to offer us: it can improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideologies of which we are unaware because they are “built into” our language. However, in order to understand how deconstruction reveals the hidden work of ideology in our daily experience of ourselves and our world, we must first understand deconstruction’s view of language because, according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies programme us without our being aware of them. Deconstruction’s theory of language, in contrast, is based on the belief

that language is much more slippery and ambiguous than we realise. As a literature student, your goal is to use deconstruction to help enrich your reading of literary texts, to help you see some important ideas they illustrate that you might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without deconstruction, and to help you see the ways in which language blinds us to the ideologies it embodies.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the origin of Deconstruction
- discuss the theoretical postulations of Deconstructionist Criticism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 The Emergence of Deconstruction**

Deconstruction differs from New Criticism because it does not attempt a resolution of paradoxes and ambiguities through any appeal to organic unity in the literary text. Deconstruction queries the notion of the self-enclosed literary work and the idea that any work has a fixed identifiable meaning. It does not place exclusive emphasis on the text alone because the theory expands the notion of what constitutes a text. Deconstruction was developed by the French critic Jacques Derrida in the late 1960s and became a major influence on literary studies during the late 1970s. Deconstruction takes apart the logic of language and insists that all texts include unconscious traces of other positions exactly opposite to that which it sets out to uphold. Deconstruction attempts to loosen language from pre-conceived concepts and referents. It attacks the assumption that a text has a single, stable meaning. Derrida suggests that all interpretation of a text simply constitutes further texts, which means there is no “outside the text” at all. Therefore, it is impossible for a text to have stable meaning. The practice of deconstruction involves identifying the contradictions within a text’s claim to have a single, stable meaning, and showing that a text can be taken to mean a variety of things that differ significantly from what it purports to mean. Apart from Derrida, other proponents of deconstructive criticism include John Miller and Paul de Man.

#### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the impact of Jacques Derrida on the development of deconstruction.

### **3.2 Theoretical Postulations of Deconstructionist**

## Criticism

Primarily, deconstructive criticism is concerned with:

- the relation of words to things
- whether or not there is certainty of truth
- whether or not texts have meanings beyond what the reader makes of what he reads
- whether interpretation is an individual thing, or it is the particular thing that the author has in mind when writing.

Lois Tyson (2006) argues that deconstruction claims that language is non-referential because it refers neither to things in the world nor to our concepts of things but only to the play of signifiers of which language itself consists. Deconstruction thus offers us a radical vision of the activity of thinking. Our mental life consists not of concepts—not of solid, stable meanings—but of a fleeting, continually changing play of signifiers. Derrida, on his part, argues that language has two important characteristics:

- its play of signifiers continually defers, or postpones, meaning
- the meaning it seems to have is the result of the differences by which we distinguish one signifier from another.

He combines the French words for “to defer” and “to differ” to coin the word *différance*, which is his name for the only “meaning” language can have. For deconstruction, therefore, if language is the ground of being, then the world is the infinite *text*, that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play. Because human beings are constituted by language, they, too, are texts.

In other words, deconstructionist theory of language has implications for *subjectivity*, for what it means to be a human being as the theory asserts that our experience of ourselves and our world is produced by the language we speak, and because all language is an unstable, ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies, we are, ourselves, unstable and ambiguous force-fields of competing ideologies. Basically, for deconstruction:

- Language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings
- Existence has no centre, no stable meaning, no fixed ground
- Human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only “identities” are the ones we invent and choose to believe.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Explain the deconstruction claim that language is non-referential?

For deconstruction, literature is as dynamic, ambiguous and unstable as the language of which it is composed. Meaning is not a stable element residing in the text for us to uncover or passively consume. Meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading. Or, more precisely, meaning is produced by the play of language through the vehicle of the reader, though we generally refer to this process as “the reader”. Furthermore, the meaning that is created is not a stable element capable of producing closure; that is, no interpretation has the final word. Rather, literary texts, like all texts, consist of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us. What have been considered the “obvious” or “commonsense” interpretations of a given text are really ideological readings—interpretations produced by a culture’s values and beliefs—with which we are so familiar that we consider them “natural”. In short, we create the meaning and value we “find” in the text. Just as authors cannot help but draw on the assumptions of their cultural milieu when they construct their texts, readers as well cannot help but draw on the assumptions of theirs when they construct their readings. Therefore, both literary and critical texts can be deconstructed.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What do deconstructionists take as the meaning of a text?

There are generally two main purposes in deconstructing a literary text, and we may see either or both at work in any given deconstructive reading:

(1) to reveal the text’s *undecidability* and/or  
 (2) to reveal the complex operations of the ideologies of which the text is constructed. To reveal a text’s undecidability is to show that the “meaning” of the text is really an indefinite, undecidable, plural, conflicting array of possible meaning and that the text, therefore, has no meaning, in the traditional sense of the word, at all. This goal can be accomplished, in brief, by the following procedure:

- (1) Note all the various interpretations—of characters, events, images, and so on—the text seems to offer
- (2) Show the ways in which these interpretations conflict with one another

- (3) Show how these conflicts produce still more interpretations, which produce still more conflicts, which produce still more interpretations
- (4) Use steps 1, 2, and 3 to argue for the text's undecidability. Undecidability does not mean that the reader is unable to choose among possible interpretations. It does not mean that the text cannot "make up its mind" as to what it wants to say. Rather, *undecidability* means that reader and text alike are inextricably bound within language's dissemination of meanings. That is, reader and text are interwoven threads in the perpetually working loom of language. Specific meanings are just "moments" of meaning that give way, inevitably, to more meanings. Thus, the literary text is used to illustrate the indefinite, plural, conflicting possible meanings that constitute all texts, literary and otherwise, because all texts are made of language.

The other purpose in deconstructing a literary text is to see what the text can show us about the ideologies of which it is constructed. This endeavour usually shows us something about the ways in Deconstructive criticism which ideologies operate in our own view of the world as well.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you have learnt that for deconstructionist critics.

- (1) Language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings.
- (2) Existence has no centre, no stable meaning, and no fixed ground.
- (3) Human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only "identities" are the ones we invent and choose to believe.

You also learnt that there are generally two main purposes in deconstructing a literary text:

- (1) to reveal the text's *undecidability* and/or
- (2) to reveal the complex operations of the ideologies of which the text is constructed.

To reveal a text's undecidability is to show that the "meaning" of the text is really an indefinite, undecidable, plural, conflicting array of possible meaning and that the text, therefore, has no meaning, in the traditional sense of the word, at all.

#### 5.0 SUMMARY

Literature, for deconstructionist critics, is as dynamic, ambiguous and unstable as the language of which it is composed. Meaning is not a stable element residing in the text for us to uncover or passively consume. Meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading. Or, more precisely, meaning is produced by the play of language through the vehicle of the reader, though we generally refer to this process as “the reader”. Furthermore, the meaning that is created is not a stable element capable of producing closure; that is, no interpretation has the final word. Rather, literary texts, like all texts, consist of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us.

What have been considered the “obvious” or “commonsense” interpretations of a given text are really ideological readings—interpretations produced by a culture’s values and beliefs—with which we are so familiar that we consider them “natural.” In short, we create the meaning and value we “find” in the text. Just as authors cannot help but draw on the assumptions of their cultural milieu when they construct their texts, readers as well cannot help but draw on the assumptions of theirs when they construct their readings

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the theory of deconstruction.
2. Meaning, for deconstructionists, is not a stable element residing in the text. Expatiate.

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## **MODULE 3 THEORIES OF LITERATURE (2)**

Unit 1	Marxist Theory and Criticism
Unit 2	Biographical Criticism
Unit 3	Historical Criticism
Unit 4	New Historicism
Unit 5	Psychoanalytical Theory

### **UNIT 1 MARXIST CRITICISM**

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#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Marxist criticism is based on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Their beliefs include the following: value is based on labour; and the working class will eventually overthrow the capitalist middle class. In the meantime, the middle class exploits the working class. Most institutions—religious, legal, educational and governmental—are corrupted by middle-class capitalists. Marxist critics apply these economic and social theories to literature by analysing first, ideologies that support the elite and place the working class at a disadvantage, and secondly, class conflict. Marxist criticism is often interested in unravelling how a literary work reflects (intentionally or not) the socio-economic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle? According to Kelly Griffith (2002), fully developed Marxist criticism appeared early in the 20th century, especially in the 1930s during the Great Depression. This "socialist" criticism applauded literature that depicted the difficulties of the poor and downtrodden, especially when they struggled against oppressive capitalist bosses. Examples of literature with such strong "proletarian"

elements are works by Emile Zola, Maxim Gorky, Charles Dickens, Richard Wright, John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Femi Osofisan. Early Marxist critics approved of a socialist solution to the problems of the oppressed and judged the quality of works on the basis of their Marxist orientation. The strong “proletarian” elements in the works of African writers like Ngugi assume combative dimensions in the late 1970s and 1980s with street theatre enactments of Marxist-oriented plays that shook the establishment earning him the tag of “literary guerilla of the masses” in his country, Kenya.

Beginning from World War II, however, a new generation of critics infused Marxist criticism with renewed vigour. A good example is the Hungarian critic Georg Lukacs, who argues that literature should reflect the real world. By this, Lukacs does not mean that literature should be a mirror image of society by, for example, giving detailed descriptions of its physical contents or its patterns of behaviour. Rather, literature should represent the economic tensions in society as described in Marx's writings. Ironically, for Lukacs, works that accurately represent the real world may be less "real" than works that emphasise themes (ideas) over description. Lukacs believes that literature might even have to distort reality in order to represent the "truth" about society. To show the economic struggles caused by capitalism, for example, an author might have to create character types one would never meet in real life. This unit examines the theoretical postulations of Marxism as well as its shortcomings.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the theoretical postulations of Marxism
- explain its shortcomings as a theoretical construct
- explain Karl Marx's influence on Marxism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 The Origin of Marxist Theory and Criticism**

As mentioned earlier, Marxist criticism evolved from the philosophies of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels. Marxism views a literary text as the product of an ideology particular to a specific historical period, not the product of an individual consciousness. The text, for Marxist critics, is judged on the basis of its portrayal of social actions. They insist that literature must be understood in relation to historical and social reality. The central Marxist position is that the economic base of a society determines the nature and

structure of the ideology, institutions and practices, including literature, that form the superstructure of that society. In Lukacs' book, *The Historical Novel*, he argues that literature must evoke a revolutionary consciousness in the common people. In his view, a good artist is one who can effectively represent the totality of human life. The most effective mode for this representation is literary realism, which for Lukacs reflects reality in the Marxist sense. Lukacs sees realism as the only literary mode capable of representing the totality of society by revealing through its narrative form the underlying movement of history. Marxism situates literature in its historical contexts and in its socio-economic development. Marxism describes history as the history of the conflict between classes. Foremost Marxist critics, such as Christopher Claudwell, Georg Lukacs and Walter Benjamin, see literature as refracting socio-economic reality.

Importantly too, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is also revered as one of the key contributors to the Marxist tradition in the 20th century, along with thinkers such as Louis Althusser and Vladimir Lenin. His contribution entailed a revision of predominant interpretations of Marx's writings during his time, in order to address the flurry of criticisms levelled at Marxist theory (both from within and outside the Marxist tradition). More specifically, Gramsci's ideas can be described as political and revolutionary. He sought to formulate a variant of Marxism that would make sense of existing power relations and the political currents within Italian society; at the same time, he advocated a distinct (and extensive) course of action for his country's socialist movements. Two main trends could be identified in Gramsci's postulations. Firstly, Gramsci fundamentally rejects interpretations of Marx which trade on a crude materialism (and economism). To this end, he accords a greater role to the "superstructure" and emphasises the importance of culture, civil society, political practice, and social action. Secondly, Gramsci consistently resists mechanistic (or deterministic) readings of Marx's theory of history; instead he stresses the logic of contingency in place of logic of necessity with regards to social change-this is evidenced in his prescriptions for political (and revolutionary) practice.

In fact, Gramsci sought to develop a coherent account to explicate and explain structure-superstructure dialectic, departing from the dominant underpinnings of materialism and "economism" present in accounts of classical Marxism. It is evident that he could not envision a simple one-way causal relationship which proceeded directly from structure to superstructure. In line with questioning crudely materialist accounts of Marxism, Gramsci was also clearly interested in emphasising the role of ideas and social practice.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss the importance of ideology to Marxist criticism.

### **3.2 Contributions of Karl Marx to Marxist Criticism**

As we noted earlier, Marxist criticism evolves from the philosophies of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels. Marx made a number of important statements on the nature of human society one of which is that consciousness determines life. A change in material conditions does lead to changes in the way humans think. He was also persuaded that the economic system is the most fundamental aspect of any society. Other aspects of society, culture, literature, politics and religion, are parts of a "superstructure" whose characteristics are, at least, to some extent dependent on the nature of the base. Marx's Philosophy though focusing on history, philosophy, and economics, has proved to be of special interest to critics of literature and culture.

The concepts of "alienation" and "commoditisation" have proved useful to Marxist critics of literature. With division of labour in society, a separation occurs between individuals who become distanced from each other because of their different skills and engagements. Individuals also become estranged from society as a whole because they participate only in small portions of what is going on in society. As far as Marx is concerned, a "commodity" is an article produced not for use but for sale. A "commodity" is valued not for its use but for its price. The individual may become emotionally attached to the commodity in a way that causes his estrangement from material reality. The individual is alienated from the fruit of his labour. Marx regards literature as a form of ideology just like the parliament, judiciary, education, religion, philosophy, politics and law which can be used for the needs of the capitalists or the proletariat. Necessarily, literature, the Marxists contend, reflects the reality outside it. This is quite the opposite of what the formalists believe. The message is more important in Marxist criticism than the form or the device. Almost all leading Marxists, like Lenin, have made significant pronouncements on literature and society. Lenin, for instance, calls for an openly class-partisan literature. He argues that neutrality in writing is impossible; rather literature should be linked with the working-class movement.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss why the message is more important than the form or the device in Marxist criticism in the light of "commoditisation."

### 3.3 The Fundamental Premises of Marxist Criticism

The function of Marxist literary criticism is to expose how works of literature represent dominant ideologies. Some Marxist critics, like Louis Althusser, believe that literature helps readers see the contradictions and fault lines in ideology. Others, like Terry Eagleton, hold that literature furthers ideology by making it seem attractive and "natural." Eagleton's work, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), provides an overview of recent Marxist criticism, while his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) surveys modern critical theory from a Marxist point of view. In *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Eagleton rightly defines Marxist criticism as "part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies – the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times. Certain numbers of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature". He finally summarises its value, maintaining that "to understand ideologies is to understand both the past and the present more deeply; and such understanding contributes to our liberation".

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Attempt a Marxist analysis of Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Petals of Blood*.

For Marxist critics, politics and economics cannot be separated from art. Marxists hold that any theory which treats literature in isolation as pure aesthetics or the product of a writer's ingenuity, divorcing it from society and history, will be seriously deficient in its ability to explain what literature really is. For Marxist critics, social background is important in the consideration of any particular work.

Furthermore, Marxists see history as a series of struggles between antagonistic social classes and the type of economic production they engage in. The structure of history and the structure of society are referred to as *dialectical*- the dynamic and opposed forces at work within them. Dialectic refers to a method by which history and society can be analysed in order to reveal the true relationship between their component parts.

Marxism has very many different approaches. A critic might, for instance, start by looking at the structure of history and society to see how literature reflects or distorts this structure. He could also start from a general concept of literature and then move to writers and texts and out to society. He could also start from a specific text and move to the author, the author's class and the role of this class in society. In Marxist thinking, the socio-economic element in any

society is the ultimate determinant of that society's character. The basic economic structure engenders a number of social institutions and beliefs which act to regulate or dissipate the conflict and keep the mode of production in order. Literature is one of the things situated in the base or superstructure of society. This means that literature is a social element that can be used either to keep the capitalist mode of economy and life-style in place or to expose and attack it.

Marxism has also given rise to the doctrine of socialist realism which sees literature as social criticism and analysis. The artist is a social activist. The writer, according to Marxist critics, translates social facts into literary facts, and the critic's duty is to decode the facts and uncover its reality. It is the writer's duty to provide a truthful, historico-concrete portrayal of reality. This makes the notion of reflection of reality a deep-seated tendency in Marxist criticism. It is a way of combating formalist theory which locks the literary work within its own sealed world, divorced from history and social reality. The Marxist writer is a socially or ideologically committed writer. In Marxist criticism, there is no room for '*arts for art's sake*'. The writer must be interested in his own time and be socially responsible.

### **3.4 Criticisms against Marxist Criticism**

As you have learnt so far, Karl Marx saw a capitalist society as basically a class society where the oppression of a class by another is perpetrated. He was an avowed adversary of oppression in whatever form and joined the proletariat (working class) to advocate for the abolition of class oppression. Also the philosophy of Marxism is rooted in what is known as dialectical materialism, which stresses economic determinism (economic survival) as an index of social struggles. Marxist ideologues believe that all social struggles are economy-based whose resolution stirs conflicts among the different classes inhabiting a social milieu. For the Marxists, human society is divided into two broad classes; the oppressor and the oppressed (in Marx' parlance the bourgeoisie and the proletariat). By holding the means of production, the bourgeoisie becomes dominant thereby oppressing the latter.

One of the allegations levelled against Marxism is that by the fact that the Communist Bloc in Europe has failed, it is a proof that Marxism is not a viable theory. Again, the overthrow of the upper class by the peasants, as advocated by Marxism, remains a mirage in reality.

Despite its shortcomings, Marxist theory still provides us a meaningful way to understand history and current events.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

- i. The interest of Marxist literature is to defend the cause of the oppressed. Discuss.
- ii. Marxism is rooted in dialectic materialism; how does this relate to the literary text?

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you have learnt in sufficient detail the theory of Marxist criticism. According to Lois Tyson (2006), literature, for Marxist critics, does not exist in some timeless, aesthetic realm as an object to be passively contemplated. Rather, like all cultural manifestations, it is a product of the socio-economic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it to be so. Because human beings are themselves products of their socio-economic and ideological environment, it is assumed that authors cannot help but create works that embody ideology in some form. For Marxists, the fact that literature grows out of and reflects real material/historical conditions creates at least two possibilities of interest to Marxist critics:

- (1) The literary work might tend to reinforce in the reader the ideologies it embodies, or
- (2) It might invite the reader to criticise the ideologies it represents.

Many texts do both, and it is not merely the *content* of a literary work—the “action” or the theme—that carries ideology, but the *form* as most Marxists would argue. They contend that if content is the “what” of literature, then form is the “how”. Realism, for example, gives us characters and plot as if we were looking through a window onto an actual scene taking place before our eyes. Our attention is drawn not to the nature of the words on the page but to the action those words convey. For some Marxists, realism is the best form for Marxist purposes because it clearly and accurately represents the real world, with all its socio-economic inequities and ideological contradictions. It also encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors intend it they are bound to represent socio-economic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

Marxist criticism is fundamentally anchored on the work of Karl Marx. It is a dominant critical theory propounded in the middle of the 19th century and flourished tremendously throughout the 20th century. It is concerned with historical and cultural issues. Marxism identifies social and economic factors as crucial denominators of relationship in society. Karl Marx saw a capitalist society as basically a class society where the oppression of a class by another is perpetrated. He was an avowed adversary of oppression in whatever form. Thus, he joined the proletariat (working class) to advocate for the abolition of class oppression. The philosophy of Marxism is rooted in what is known as dialectical materialism, which stresses economic determinism (economic survival) as an index of social struggles. The Marxist ideologues believe that all social struggles are economy-based whose resolution stirs conflicts among the different classes inhabiting a social milieu. Society is divided into two broad classes; the oppressor and the oppressed, who in Marxist parlance are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat respectively. Because the former holds the means of production, it becomes dominant and hence oppresses the latter.

It is the duty of Marxist writers to expose the oppressors' class and its mechanism of oppression. This is the reason Marxist critics see the history of society as the history of class struggles and also explain the class struggles and antagonism predominant in a capitalist society. The interest of Marxist literature is to defend the course of the oppressed. The Marxist critics believe that the achievement of this goal is by evolving an egalitarian society where the ideal is stressed. To achieve this, they explore society and situate sources of oppression. They identify and critique elements of exploitation, alienation and other indices of oppression. They go beyond critiquing to also proffer panacea to the crises engendered by social parity (Jide Balogun, 2011).

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the fundamental premises on which Marxist criticism revolves.
2. Explain the role of Karl Marx in the development and spread of Marxist critical theory.



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## UNIT 2 BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

### CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Biographical Criticism: A Definition
  - 3.2 Fundamental Tenets of Biographical Criticism
  - 3.3 Shortcomings of Biographical Criticism
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- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

An author's life, to a large extent, could affect the meaning of a work. Biographical criticism is a theoretical approach to literature that manifests some interest in the author. In this unit, you are going to learn how the facts about an author's life could signpost the ideas in his work. You will also learn how an event in the author's life could affect his or her themes or choice of subject matter. Biographical criticism began with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers comprehend the work more thoroughly. Anyone who reads the biography of a writer quickly sees how much an author's experience shapes—both directly and indirectly—what he or she creates. Sometimes, mere knowing a single important fact about an author's life could illuminate our reading of a poem or story written by that author. Though many literary theorists have assailed biographical criticism on philosophical grounds, the biographical approach to literature has never disappeared because of its obvious practical advantage in illuminating literary texts.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Explain in details the theoretical assumptions of biographical criticism.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define biographical criticism
- discuss the postulations of biographical criticism.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Biographical Criticism: A Definition

Biographical criticism is the practice of analysing a piece of literary work through the lens of the author's experience. It considers the ways age, race, gender, family, education, and economic status inform a writer's work. In biographical criticism, a critic might also examine how a literary work reflects personality characteristics, life experiences, and psychological dynamics of the author. The thrust of biographical criticism is that to understand some literary works, readers need knowledge of the author's biographical facts or experiences.

Kelly Griffith (2002) opines that biographical criticism received intellectual impetus from 19th and 20th centuries ideas about science and is still very much practised. Samuel Johnson is reputed to be the first great biographical critic. His book *Lives of the Poets* (1779) provides truthful accounts of authors' lives and astute assessments of their literary achievements. Biographical criticism provides a practical assistance of understanding subtle but important meaning in a work. It focuses on explicating a literary text by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life. Among the questions to ask in biographical criticism include: "How does the text reflect the author's life? Is this text an extension of the author's position on issues in the author's life?" In this unit, our focus is to identify and critique some of the rudiments of biographical criticism.

#### SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Define biographical criticism.

#### 3.2 Fundamental Tenets of Biographical Criticism

As noted in the introductory section above, biographical criticism investigates how an individual author's life and thoughts influence a work. This means that biographical criticism is not an attempt to draw parallels between the author's life and his fiction; rather, it is a study of the author's intention and audience. Biographical criticism seeks to illuminate the deeper meaning of themes, conflicts, characters, settings and literary allusions based on the author's own concerns and conflicts. For biographical critics, a literary work is a reflection of the author's life, and should be studied in conjunction for full meaning and appreciation.

Biographical criticism examines the effect and influence of the writer's life on his or her work. The premise behind biographical criticism is that

knowing something about the writer's life helps us to more fully understand his or her work. Understanding the writer's life and influences helps the reader discover the author's intended meaning. The assumption of biographical criticism is that interpretation of a literary work should be based on an understanding of the context in which the work was written. Although biographical criticism is not concerned with retelling the author's life, it applies information from the author's life to the interpretation of the work. The focus remains on the work of literature, and the biographical information is pulled in only as a means of enhancing our understanding of the work. For biographical critics, the writing of literary works is affected by the lives and experiences of their authors. This, however, is not to assume that all works are biographical; rather, all works are certainly influenced by the life experience of the writer.

For a thorough biographical criticism, the reader should research the author's life, use the biographical information to understand the inferential and evaluative levels of the work; research the author's beliefs; relate those systems of belief to the work; explain how the connections reflect in the work's themes and topics; explain what can be determined about the author's statements within the text based on the biographical information. Thus, when doing a biographical criticism, the following questions should be asked:

- 1). Are facts about the writer's life relevant to my understanding of the work?
- 2). Are characters and incidents in the work versions of the writer's own experiences?
- 3). Are the writer's values reflected in the work?
- 4). How do the connections explain the author's purpose and the overall meaning of the work?

Biographical criticism has some weaknesses that should be avoided. For instance, the critic should always avoid equating the work's content with the author's life (or the character with the author) as they may not necessarily be the same.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Attempt a biographical criticism of any literary text you have read.

### **3.3 Shortcomings of Biographical Criticism**

As you have learnt so far, biographical criticism examines to what extent an author's life unintentionally affects his work. One drawback to this approach in literary criticism is the reliance on source material that

may not be accurate or complete. Again, the New Critics' school of literary criticism believe that the biographical approach tends to reduce art to the level of biography, making it relative (to the times) rather than universal. Thus, a biographical critic should base his interpretation on what is in the text itself. In essence, biographical data should simply amplify the meaning of a text and not to drown it out with irrelevant material.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we have examined the theoretical postulations of biographical criticism. According to *Wikipedia*, biographical criticism is a form of literary criticism which analyses a writer's biography to show the relationship between the author's life and his work. This critical method dates back to the Renaissance period, and was employed extensively by Samuel Johnson in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81). Like any critical methodology, biographical criticism should be used with discretion and insight or employed as a superficial shortcut to understanding the literary work on its own terms. Biographical criticism came under disapproval by the New Critics of the 1920s, who coined the term "biographical fallacy" to describe criticism that neglected the imaginative genesis of literature. Notwithstanding this critique by the New Critics, biographical criticism remains a significant mode of literary inquiry and continues to be employed in the study of literature.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

In summary, biographical criticism postulates that all literary works are situated in specific historical and biographical contexts from which they are generated. It rejects the concept that literary studies should be limited to the internal or formal characteristics of a literary work, and insists that it properly includes knowledge of the life of the author who created the work. The biographical approach allows one to better understand elements within a work, as well as to relate works to authorial intention and audience.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Briefly itemise and discuss the tenets of biographical criticism.
2. What are the shortcomings and weaknesses of biographical criticism?

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## **UNIT 3 HISTORICAL CRITICISM**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Overview of Historical Criticism
  - 3.2 Fundamental Tenets of Historical Criticism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Kelly Griffith (2002) observes that during the 19th century, the growing faith in science influenced both literature and the interpretation of literature, making historical criticism a popular critical approach. Historical criticism emphasises the social and cultural environment that surrounds a work of art. Historical criticism has several goals, including the study of a particular culture and the evolution of literary tradition. Historical criticism attempts to understand literary references in the context of the environment in which they were written since both language and cultures change over time. This unit introduces you to the origin and theoretical tenets of historical criticism.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define historical criticism
- discuss the theoretical tenets of historical criticism.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Overview of Historical Criticism**

Historical theory requires that you apply to literary text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time. Griffith states that historical critics believe they could illuminate works of literature by studying what gave birth to them: the intellectual and cultural environment from which they came, their sources and antecedents, authors' lives, authors' intentions and authors' language. They believe that their approach is

"scientific" because they deal with objective reality—historically verifiable facts—and use a scientific method for collecting such facts. Two French philosophers who influenced historical criticism are Auguste Comte and Hippolyte Taine. Taine, in his *History of English Literature* (1863), holds that all art is an expression of the environment and time in which the artist lives. Historical critics concentrate on authors they assume are "great," not worrying much about why or what the works meant. A major emphasis of historical criticism is the historical periods and intellectual movements to which works belonged. To this end, critics study the conventions and ideas that characterise movements, such as blank verse during the Renaissance and an emphasis on free-will during the Romantic period. They place works within evolving traditions (the novel, Christian literature, allegory, political fiction, and the epic) and compare them to the literature of other countries. Historical critics assume that the ideas associated with a particular age are manifested in the works of the age.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What is the relationship of history to a literary text according to historical critics? Who are the philosophers that influence this critical canon?

### **3.2 Fundamental Tenets of Historical Criticism**

As noted above, historical criticism seeks to recognise the influence of the environment on literature. Among the steps to take when considering the historical context in literary criticism are:

- determine the historical period of the work
- consider major events, values, beliefs, etc. of the epoch
- consider how the work fits with, or stands apart from, mainstream values or beliefs of the time
- consider other texts of the time that might give the reader insight into the time period.

Summing up the fundamental principles of historical criticism, Douglass Bush (1965) surmises that since the great mass of great literature belongs to the past, adequate criticism must grow out of historical knowledge, cultural and linguistic, as well as out of intuitive insight. Every work must be understood on its own terms as the product of a particular mind in a particular setting, and that mind and setting must be re-created through all the resources that learning and the historical imagination can muster—not excluding the author's intention, if that is known. The very pastness of a work is part of its meaning for us and must be realised to the best of our power. If we do not pay atten-

tion to authors and their historical context, Bush says, we run the risk of anachronistic misreadings and misunderstandings. We may be limited in our ability to:

re-create the outward and inward conditions in which a work of art was engendered, but unless we try, we cannot distinguish between its local and temporal and its universal and timeless elements, indeed we may not be able to understand some works at all.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you learnt that historical criticism seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it—a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu. You also learnt that historical critics are less concerned with explaining a work's literary significance for today's readers than with helping us understand the work by recreating, as nearly as possible, the exact meaning and impact it had on its original audience. A historical reading of a literary work begins by exploring the possible ways in which the meaning of the text has changed over time.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

Historical criticism can help one to better understand how the time and place in which the creation of a literary work affects its meaning and interpretation. A major emphasis of historical criticism is the historical period and intellectual movement to which the literary work belongs. To this end, critics study the conventions and ideas that characterises movements, such as blank verse during the Renaissance and an emphasis on free will during the Romantic period. They place works within evolving traditions (the novel, Christian literature, allegory, political fiction, the epic) and compare them to the literature of other countries. Historical critics assume that the ideas associated with a particular age are manifested in the works of the age.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Distinguish between biographical criticism and historical criticism.
2. What are the fundamental tenets of historical criticism?
3. Attempt an analysis of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, using the historical criticism paradigm.

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## UNIT 4 NEW HISTORICISM

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- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Emergence of New Historicism
  - 3.2 Theoretical Perspective of New Historicism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

New Historicism is a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt. It designates a body of theoretical and interpretive practices that began largely with the study of early modern literature in the United States. According to “New Historicism,” the circulation of literary and non-literary texts produces relations of social power within a culture. New Historicist thought differs from traditional historicism in literary studies in several crucial ways. Rejecting traditional historicism’s premise of neutral inquiry, “New Historicism” accepts the necessity of making historical value judgments. According to “New Historicism,” we can only know the textual history of the past because it is “embedded,” a key term, in the textuality of the present and its concerns. For the “New Historicist,” all acts of expression are embedded in the material conditions of a culture. Texts are examined with an eye for how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion. “New Historicism” takes particular interest in representations of marginal/marginalised groups.

As a theoretical concept, New Historicism views literature as part of history, and furthermore, as an expression of forces on history. New Historicism compares literary analysis to a dynamic circle whereby the work tells us something about the surrounding ideology (slavery, rights of women, etc.) and a study of the ideology tells us something about the work. Generally, New historicism takes two forms, namely: analysis of the work in the context in which it is created and analysis of the work in the context in which it is critically evaluated. New Historicists like Kirszner and Mandell (2008), assert that literature “does not exist outside time and place and cannot be interpreted without reference to the era in which it was written.” As a theoretical perspective, New Historicism claims that readers are influenced by their culture, hence no objective reading of a work is possible. Adherents of New Historicism

are of the opinion that critics should consider how their own culture affects their interpretation of the historical influence on a work. The aim of this unit is to introduce you to the theoretical tenets of New Historicism.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the emergence of New Historicism
- discuss the theoretical tenets of New Historicism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 The Emergence of New Historicism**

Lois Tyson (2006) argues that New Historicism emerged in the late 1970s, rejecting both traditional historicism's marginalisation of literature and New Criticism's enshrinement of the literary text in a timeless dimension beyond history. Thus, for new historicist critics, a literary text does not embody the author's intention or illustrate the spirit of the age that produced it, as traditional literary historians asserted; nor are literary texts self-sufficient art objects that transcend the time and place in which they were written, as New Critics believed. Rather, literary texts are cultural artefacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because the literary text is itself, part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning. For new historicism, the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions, that new historical and cultural criticism which produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts.

New Historicism is not interested in historical events as events, but with the ways in which events are interpreted, with historical discourses, with the ways of seeing the world and modes of meaning. Historical events are viewed by New Historicists not as facts to be documented but as "texts" to be "read" in order to help us speculate about how human cultures, at various historical moments, have made sense of themselves and their world. Although we cannot really know exactly what happened at any given point in history, we can know what the people involved believed happened, and we can also interpret those interpretations. For New Historical literary critics, the literary text, through its

representation of human experience at a given time and place, is an interpretation of history. As such, the literary text maps the discourses circulating at the time it was written and is itself one of those discourses. That is, the literary text shapes and is shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it is produced. Likewise, our interpretations of literature shape and are shaped by the culture in which we live.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

- i. When did New Historicism emerge and which critical canons did it react to?
- ii. How does New Historicism view the literary text?

### **3.2 Theoretical Perspective of New Historicism**

The key assumptions of New Historicism, according to Kelly Griffith (2002), are embedded in its understanding of several related concepts: culture, text, discourse, ideology, the self and history. These concepts, in turn, establish the New Historicist approach to the study of literature and are based on structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language. The first term, culture, is the most important. In an anthropological sense, "culture" is the total way of life of a particular society—its language, economy, art, religion, and attachment to a location. For New Historicists, culture is also a collection of codes that everyone in a society shares and which allows them to communicate, create artifacts, and act. These codes include not just language but every element of a culture—literature, dress, food, rituals, and games.

The New Historicist's approach to literary study is based on three things—literature, the author, and the reader—and this helps distinguish it from other theoretical approaches. New Historicism claims that literature is merely a "text" indistinguishable in nature from all the other texts that constitute a culture. The concept "literature" is "socially constructed"; every society decides what "literature" is and what its conventions are, and these definitions always vary from society to society and age to age. Equally relative are judgments about literary value. No single author's works are better than those of other authors; no single work is better than others; no one culture's works are better than those of other cultures. Rather, all texts, literary and otherwise (including "popular" texts such as television shows, advertisements, and drugstore romances), are worthy of study.

The author, for the New Historicists, is far less noble and autonomous than in other approaches. Like everyone else, authors are "subjects"

manufactured by culture. A culture "writes" an author who, in turn, transcribes cultural codes and discourses into literary texts. Authors' intentions about the form and meaning of their work merely reflect cultural codes and values. Likewise, culture "programmes" the reader to respond to its codes and forms of discourse. When readers read works of literature, they respond automatically to the codes embodied by them.

New Historicists believe that literature is history. It is "enmeshed" in history. Hence, when New Historicists study literature, they examine such things as how the work was composed, what the author's intentions were, what events and ideas the work refers to, how readers have responded to the work, and what the work means for people today. They draw upon many disciplines—anthropology, sociology, law, psychology, and history—to show what role literature has played in history, from the author's time to the present. Again, New Historicists focus on literature as cultural text. They study the relationship between literature and other texts, including non-literary and popular texts. They identify the codes that constitute literary discourse and ascertain how people use such discourse to communicate with one another and to comment on society. In addition, New Historicists scrutinise the relationship of literature to the power structures of society. They want to show how literature serves, opposes and changes the wishes of the power elites and therefore what ideologies literature supports or undermines. Finally, many New Historicists see criticism itself as an "intervention" in society.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

- i. What distinguishes the other critical approaches from the New Historicist approach?
- ii. How do New Historicists see the literary writer and the reader of a literary text?
- iii. For New Historicists, literature is history, and criticism is an "intervention in society." Explain.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, the origin and theoretical postulations of New Historicism were outlined. You learnt that New Historicism views literature as part of history. New Historicism compares literary analysis to a dynamic circle whereby the work tells us something about the surrounding ideology (slavery, rights of women, etc.), and a study of the ideology tells us something about the work. Generally, New historicism takes two forms, namely: analysis of the work in the context in which it was created and analysis of the work in the context in which it was critically

evaluated. As a theoretical perspective, New Historicism claims that readers are influenced by their culture; hence no objective reading of a work is possible. Adherents of New Historicism are of the opinion that critics should consider how their own culture affects their interpretation of the historical influence on a work.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

As Griffith has noted, the New Historicist approach to literary study is based on three things—the text, the author, and the reader—and this helps distinguish it from other theoretical approaches. New Historicism claims that literature is merely a "text" indistinguishable in nature from all the other texts that constitute a culture. The concept "literature" is "socially constructed"; every society decides what "literature" is and what its conventions are, and these definitions always vary from society to society and age to age. Equally relative are judgments about literary value. No single author's works are better than those of other authors; no single work is better than others; no one culture's works are better than those of other cultures. Rather, all texts, literary and otherwise (including "popular" texts such as television shows, advertisements, and drugstore romances), are worthy of study.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Distinguish between Historicism as a theoretical concept from New Historicism.
2. 'Culture affects the interpretation of literary works'. Discuss this statement in light of the postulations of New Historicism.

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## UNIT 5 PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

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- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Emergence of Psychoanalytic Theory
  - 3.2 The Influence of Sigmund Freud on Psychoanalysis Theory
  - 3.3 Fundamental Premises of Psychoanalytic Theory
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Kelly Griffith (2002), psychoanalytic criticism, also called psychological criticism or Freudian theory, is a vast critical category, which often employs many approaches. First it investigates the creative process of the arts: what is the nature of literary genius, and how does it relate to normal mental functions? Such analysis may also focus on literature's effects on the reader. How does a particular work register its impact on the reader's mental and sensory faculties? The second approach involves the psychological study of a particular artist. Most modern literary biographers employ psychology to understand their subject's motivations and behaviour. The third common approach is the analysis of fictional characters. Sigmund Freud's study of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in his work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1895), is an example of this approach, which tries to bring modern insights about human behaviour into the study of how fictional characters act. While psychoanalytical criticism carefully examines the surface of the literary work, it customarily speculates on what lies underneath the text—the unspoken or perhaps even unspeakable memories, motives, and fears that covertly shape the work, especially in fictional characterisations. In this unit, you will learn the origin and application of psychoanalysis to the study of literature.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the origin of psychoanalysis criticism
- apply psychoanalytical method in the analysis of works of



literature.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Emergence of Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychoanalytic (also called psychological) literary criticism has its roots in the work of the Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1930). Freud was the first to employ this approach to the analysis of literature. Originally, psychoanalysis is a medical technique, a method of therapy for the treatment of mentally ill or distressed patients which helps them understand the source of their symptoms.

It is, in a way, a method of interpretation of the patient's words, actions and attitudes. Freud used examples from literature to diagnose his patient's illnesses. He referred to 'Oedipus Complex' to explain the natural erotic attachment of a young infant to the mother. Freud also propounded a "tripartite" model that the human psyche is not a single integrated entity but in fact consists of three very different parts. These three parts are: "id", "ego" and "superego". These three aspects of the mind have different goals and desires and operate according to different principles. The 'id' is the site of natural drives; it is a dark area of seething passion that knows only desire and has no sense of moderation or limitation. The 'ego' moderates the authoritarian demands of the 'superego' and the unmitigated desires of the 'id'. The 'ego' is equivalent to the conscious thinking mind. It is the major interface between the psyche and the outside world. The 'superego' is an internalised representation of the authority of the father and of society. Freud's tripartite model has been applied to literature by critics. Freud also contended that dreams are an indication of repressed desires in the human unconscious. Dreams represent a leaking of the unconscious mind into consciousness. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1895), Freud deals with the techniques of interpreting dreams, and critics have found his techniques highly applicable to the interpretation of literary texts.

#### **3.2 The Influence of Sigmund Freud on Psychoanalytic Theory**

As already stated, Psychoanalysts analyse literature to reveal insights about the way the human mind works. It is based on the work of Sigmund Freud. It works well as a method of analysing characters' actions and motivations. Psychoanalysis is based on the belief that all actions are influenced by the unconscious. Human beings must repress many of their desires to live peacefully with others. Repressed desires often surface in the unconscious, motivating actions. Freud is of the

opinion that the content of dreams is so rich and complex that no dream can ever be completely interpreted, much in the same way that literary scholars have often emphasised that no single interpretation of a work of literature can ever be final or complete. Freud suggests that the making of a dream is like that of a literary text. A dream is constructed through the operation of four basic processes: condensation, displacement or disguise or symbolisation, considerations or representability or dream images, and further disguise of certain elements. It is very clear that all of the processes of dream-construction described by Freud have analogies in the construction of a work of literature. Condensation and interpretation of a literary work are as true or literature as in dream-world.

Literary works also rely on figurative language in ways that make interpretation necessary. Much of the work of the literary artist involves a search for images and motifs. Language is central both to the writing of literature and to the construction of the dream-world. The parallels between literary works and Freud's dream-work are really important. For Freud, the creation of art, like dreaming, is largely a mechanism for the release of unconscious psychic energies. Psychoanalytic critics study the psychological make-up of artists through an analysis of their art, because works or art reveal something about the psychology of their creator.

Contemporary psychological critics continue to find Freud's theories a rich source of ideas about literature, but, whereas earlier critics focused on authors and characters, recent critics have turned their attention to readers and texts. The critic, Norman Holland, for example, argues that readers' psyches respond subconsciously to certain aspects of works of literature. The reader in effect "makes" the text, so that the text is different for every reader. Like Holland, the French critic, Jacques Lacan, posits ideas about how readers respond to literary texts. Lacan combines Freud's theories of the unconscious with Saussurian linguistics. He holds that the human psyche is made up of language. Our conscious and sub-conscious minds are born into language, a system of signifiers. From infancy to adulthood, we grow toward what we think is a secure and coherent identity. But at the heart of the psyche is an unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified. As a result, our psyche is never fully coherent, our identity never stable.

It is also noteworthy to state that the theories of Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, have also been employed by psychoanalytic literary critics. Jung suggests the idea that the unconscious mind also harbours "collective unconscious", that is, a repository or primitive desires common to the entire human race. In his cultural studies, Jung finds that certain images are present in myths and legends from all

over the world. These myths are powerful because they appeal to unconscious desires in every culture, possibly inherited by all members of the human race. A number of fundamental images, motifs or archetypes are present in the collective unconscious; hence, it is clear that the archetypes appearing in myths and legends would also frequently appear in literary works.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Briefly explain why Sigmund Freud is considered the father of psychoanalytic criticism.

### **3.3 Fundamental Premises of Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychological criticism examines the behaviour of characters within the text in order to unearth its deeper meaning. Just as the economic theories of Karl Marx engendered Marxist criticism, the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud inspired psychoanalytic literary interpretation. Psychological criticism is usually applied in different ways. For instance, a work of literature can be viewed as a "dream", the expressive manifestation of the subconscious. By interpreting the symbolic nature of the work, we gain insight into the psyche of the author. Psychological criticism can also focus on the characters of a work, analysing their motives, desires and conflicts even though these characters are fictional. Characters, as well as their underlying traits, are often drawn from real people and therefore can display some of the same psychological patterns. Psychological theory also influences authors as they utilise these new ideas to create more complex characters. In addition, psychological criticism can also be used to interpret the relationship between the text and the reader. In this approach, the critic acknowledges that a work of literature functions as the secret expression of what the reader wants to hear. It is this aspect that creates our enjoyment of a book.

Psychoanalysis is geared towards understanding individuals by uncovering desires hidden deep within the mind and revealing their connections with the unconscious surface. In literature, however, psychoanalytic critics believe that the unconscious mind of the author is revealed in his works. Thus, the psychoanalytic critic may begin with a study of the elements in a writer's biography that shape his imagination and then apply this to the work. He may also use the work as the equivalent of a confession and then go on to draw conclusion about the writer from this. Psychoanalytic criticism believes that literature provides a fruitful and complex source for the analysis of the human mind. It helps to reveal to us things about the relation between the conscious and the unconscious mind, language and

reality. A psychoanalytical interpretation of a work can help to solve the mysteries involved in complex and symbolic themes.

In subjecting a text to psychoanalytical reading, the questions to ask include: what ways can we view a literary work as analogous to a dream? That is, how might recurrent or striking dream symbols reveal the ways in which the narrator or speaker is projecting his or her unconscious desires, fears, wounds, or unresolved conflicts onto other characters, onto the setting, or onto the events portrayed? What does the work suggest about the psychological being of its author? What might a given interpretation of a literary work suggest about the psychological motives of the reader? It is important to note that not all psychoanalytic critics will interpret the same work in the same way, even if they focus on the same psychoanalytic concepts. The overall goal is to use psychoanalysis to help enrich one's reading of literary works, to help one see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without psychoanalysis (Lois Tyson, 2006).

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Explain why psychoanalytic critics would regard a literary text as a recant of its author's dream.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, our focus is on psychoanalytic Criticism. Jide Balogun (2011) avers that psychoanalysis could be considered from the perspectives of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Jacques Lacan and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). The centrality of psychological criticism is to define literature as an expression of the author's psyche pivoted on his or her unconscious being which requires an interpretation like a dream. Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits. In psychoanalytic criticism, reference to the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work. Also, reference to literary works is made in order to establish, biographically, the personality of the author. The mode of reading a literary work itself is a way of experiencing the distinctive subjectivity or consciousness of its author. This theory requires that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text. You also learnt in this unit that the leading tradition in psychological criticism is that of Freud. According to its followers, the meaning of a work of literature depends on the psyche and even on the neuroses of the author. Thus, a literary work is valued based on the author's unconscious.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In literature, psychoanalytic critics believe that the unconscious mind of the author is revealed in his works. Thus, the psychoanalytic critic may begin with a study of the elements in a writer's biography that shape his imagination and then apply this to the work. He may also use the work as the equivalent of a confession and then go on to draw conclusion about the writer from this. Psychoanalytic criticism believes that literature provides a fruitful and complex source for the analysis of the human mind. It helps to reveal to us things about the relation between the conscious and the unconscious mind, language and reality. A psychoanalytical interpretation of a work can help to solve the mysteries involved in complex and symbolic themes. Furthermore, psychoanalytic criticism investigates the creative process of the arts: what is the nature of literary genius, and how does it relate to normal mental functions? Such analysis may also focus on literature's effects on the reader. How does a particular work register its impact on the reader's mental and sensory faculties? Another approach involves the psychological study of a particular artist. Most modern literary biographers employ psychology to understand their subject's motivations and behaviour. Finally, another common approach is the analysis of fictional characters like in Freud's study of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in his work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the contributions of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung to the development of Psychoanalysis criticism.
2. Explain, in details, the theoretical underpinning of psychoanalytic criticism.

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## **MODULE 4 THEORIES OF LITERATURE (3)**

### **CONTENTS**

Unit 1	Feminist/Gender Criticism
Unit 2	Reader-Response Criticism
Unit 3	Postcolonial Theory

## **UNIT 1 FEMINIST/GENDER CRITICISM**

### **CONTENTS**

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	3.1 The Emergence of Gender/Feminist Criticism
	3.2 Stages of Development of Feminist Criticism
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Feminist criticism grew out of the women's movement that followed World War II and seeks to analyse the role of gender in works of literature. A leading feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, describes two purposes of feminist criticism: first, feminist critique (the analysis of works by male authors, especially in the depiction of women's writing); and secondly, gynocriticism (the study of women's writing). Beyond this, feminist critics have also focused on recovering neglected works by women authors through the ages and creating a canon of women's writing. Importantly, gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not. Feminist/gender criticism examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. A feminist critic sees cultural and economic disabilities in a "patriarchal" society that have hindered or prevented women from realising their creative possibilities and women's cultural identification as a merely negative object, or "Other," to man as the defining and dominating "Subject". There are several assumptions and concepts held in common by most feminist critics. First is that our civilisation is pervasively patriarchal. Second, is that the concepts of "gender" are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs, effected by the



omnipresent patriarchal biases of our civilisation. Third, this patriarchal ideology also pervades those writings that have been considered great literature. Such works, feminist critics aver, lack autonomous female role model, and are implicitly addressed to male readers, leaving the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting. In this unit, you will be introduced to feminist/gender criticism and the forces that influenced it.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the origin of feminist criticism
- define feminist/gender criticism
- discuss the postulations of feminist criticism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 The Emergence of Gender/Feminist Criticism**

Feminist or gender criticism, according to Kelly Griffith (2002), bases its interpretations on ideas about the nature of females and female experience. With the rise of feminism in the 1950s and 1960s, feminist critics claimed that, over the years, men had controlled the most influential interpretive communities. Men decided which conventions made up "literature" and judged the quality of works. Men wrote the literary histories and drew up the lists of "great" works—the literary canon. Because works by and about women were omitted from the canon, women authors were ignored, and women characters misconstrued. Since the 1960s, however, feminist literary critics have successfully challenged these circumstances. Many more women now teach, interpret, evaluate, and theorise about literature than ever before. Literary genres practised by women, such as diaries, journals, and letters, have gained more respect. Numerous anthologies, literary histories and interpretive studies explore women's contributions to literature. Today, a new movement, "gender studies", has evolved out of feminist studies in order to address broader issues; notably, the nature of both femininity and masculinity, the differences within each sex, and the literary treatment of men and homosexuals. Feminist criticism is political in that it argues for the fair representation and treatment of women.

### 3.2 Stages of Development of Feminist Criticism

Scholars have attempted to periodise the stages of emergence of feminist criticism. However, it should be noted that this categorisation is not cast on stone. Griffith states that a survey of the history of feminist and gender criticism helps to spotlight their concerns. The first stage of feminist criticism began with two influential books: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). Both authors criticise the distorted representation of women by well-known male authors. Their works laid the foundation for the most prevalent approach of this stage, the "images of women" approach. Following de Beauvoir and Millet, feminist critics called attention to the unjust, distorted, and limited representation (images) of females in works of literature, especially works authored by males. They celebrated realistic representations of women and brought to light neglected works by and about women. They sought to expose the "politics" of self-interest that led people to create stereotypical and false images of women.

In the second stage of feminist criticism, beginning in the early 1970s, critics shifted away from works by males to concentrate on works by females. Elaine Showalter, a prominent critic from this period, called this approach "gynocriticism." Gynocritics urged women to become familiar with female authors and to discover their own female "language", a language that supposedly enters the subconscious before the "patriarchal" language of the dominant culture. They tried to delineate a female poetics, a use of literary conventions and genres that seems typically "female". Some critics based feminist poetics on the possible connection between writing and the female body. Because women's bodies have more fluids than men's, they argued, women's writing is more "fluid". It is less structured, less unified, more inclusive of many points of view, less given to neat endings, and more open to fantasy than writing by men. It rejects or undermines the "marriage plot" and the "happy ending", in which a strong female protagonist submits to a male by marrying him. Female poetics seeks to understand why female authors tend to favour certain genres (lyric poetry, novel, short story, tale, letters, diaries, and memoirs) over others (epic, martial romance, drama, and satire).

The third stage of feminist criticism rebelled against the "essentialist" assumptions of gynocriticism with its focus on the cultural creation of identity. The third stage of feminist criticism attempts to distinguish between "sex" and "gender". While sex is the biological difference between males and females, gender is the cultural difference. Culture determines the traits and behaviour that set masculinity apart from femininity. Western culture, for example, has seen women as passive

rather than active, irrational rather than rational, subjective rather than objective, at home rather than at "work", spiritual rather than material, and impractical rather than practical. It has ruled that certain kinds of behaviour are "abnormal" and "unnatural" for females to practise, such as pursuing careers, doing construction work, being pastors or priests, wearing "male" clothes, or being assertive. Such gender distinctions, feminist critics claim, are arbitrary and almost always give women less power, status, and respect than men. They argue that many women are "trapped" by the gender traits assigned to them by culture.

The three "stages" of feminist criticism highlighted, according to Grffith, have overlapped and coexisted, and continued to be practised.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

List the three stages of development of feminist criticism and the focus of each stage.

### **3.3 Theoretical Postulations of Gender/Feminist Criticism**

Feminist criticism covers almost anything that has to do with female emancipation and empowerment. Jide Balogun (2011) holds that Feminist criticism is an attempt by the women-folk to universally liberate itself from male chauvinism and patriarchy. He argues that while the shift is not intended to cause gender terrorism, it aims at making the position of women at home, at work, at school, in the street etc. more challenging to themselves and their men-folk in the social phenomenon. The radical posture of feminist criticism is reflected in its dissatisfaction with the place of women in global social and cultural situations. Because of its interest in social issues, feminist criticism, like Marxism, is historical, and political, and it proposes a dynamic ideological commitment.

The feminist literary critic's interest is to pursue the cause of women in literary texts. This is accomplished by encouraging women authors to write novels, plays and poems. Furthermore, the feminist literary writer features and makes women characters and ideas dominant in her works. Such writers endeavour to propagate feminist thought, female concerns, ideas "and accomplishments and to recover the largely unrecorded and unknown history of women in earlier times" (Jerome Beaty, 2002).

According to Lois Tyson (2006), feminist criticism examines the ways in which literary texts reinforce patriarchy because the ability to see when and how patriarchal ideology operates is crucial to one's ability to resist it in one's life. Feminists have observed that the belief that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the male

monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. For feminist critics, patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically, and patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, a woman is the *other*: she is objectified and marginalised, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, and by what she (allegedly) lacks but which men (allegedly) have.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Who are the major writers that influenced feminist/gender criticism? List some of their major works.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you learnt that feminist criticism was influenced by such works as Simone Beavoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). You also learnt that feminist critics believe that culture has been so completely dominated by men to the extent that literature is full of unexamined 'male-produced' assumptions. To this end, feminist critics tend to see their criticism as correcting the imbalance, by analysing and combating patriarchy. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by promoting women's equality. Thus, feminist activity can be seen as a form of *activism* that directly promotes social change in favour of women. Among the foremost feminist writers in Africa include the Ghanaian playwright and author of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965); Zulu Sofola, the Nigerian playwright and author of *Old Wives are Tasty* (1991); Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian novelists and author of *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Bina Nengi-Ilagha the Nigerian author of *Condolences* (2002).

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

In this unit, you learnt that feminist criticism examines the ways in which literary texts reinforce patriarchy because the ability to see when and how patriarchal ideology operates is crucial to one's ability to resist it in one's life. The duty of the feminist literary critic is to pursue the cause of women in literary texts. This is accomplished by encouraging women authors to write novels, plays and poems. Furthermore, the

feminist literary writer endeavours to feature and make women characters and ideas dominant in her works.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Explain the theoretical tenets of feminist criticism.
2. Highlight some of the ways patriarchal assumptions are deconstructed by feminist critics.

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## **UNIT 2 READER-RESPONSE THEORY**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Origin of Reader-Response Theory
  - 3.2 Theoretical Postulations of Reader-Response Theory
  - 3.3 Criticisms against Reader-Response Theory
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Reader-response theory focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the responses of readers as they read a text. By this shift of perspective, a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind; that is, a reader's experience and the text. It is through this interaction that meaning is made. Proponents of this school of criticism believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence; rather readers bring their own thoughts, moods and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to base on their own expectations and ideas. This unit introduces you to the origin, tenets and criticism levelled against reader-response theory.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the concept of reader-response theory
- trace the origin of reader-response theory
- highlight some of the shortcomings of reader-response theory.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Origin of Reader-Response Theory**

As its name implies, reader-response criticism focuses on readers' responses to literary texts. This attention to the reading process, according to Lois Tyson (2006), emerged during the 1930s as a reaction against the growing tendency to reject the reader's role in creating



meaning, a tendency that became a formal principle of the New Criticism which dominated critical practice in the 1940s and 1950s.

Reader-response theory did not receive much attention until the 1970s. This school maintains that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does. Reader-response theorists share two beliefs:

- (1) That the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature; and
- (2) That readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature.

This second belief, that readers actively make meaning, suggests, of course, that different readers may read the same text quite differently. In fact, reader-response theorists believe that even the same reader reading the same text on two different occasions will probably produce different meanings because so many variables contribute to our experience of the text. The knowledge we have acquired between our first and second reading of a text, personal experiences that have occurred in the interim, a change in mood between our two encounters with the text, or a change in the purpose for which we are reading it can all contribute to our production of different meanings for the same text.

### 3.2 Theoretical Postulations of Reader-Response Theory

Kelly Griffith (2002) in *Writing Essays About Literature* contends that reader-response theory is a school of criticism which maintains that readers actually contribute to the meaning of works of literature. Reader-response criticism studies the interaction of reader with the text. Reader-response critics hold that the text is incomplete until it is read. Each reader brings something to the text that completes it and that makes each reading different. For this school of thought, the literary text has no life of its own without the reader.

Although reader-response criticism borrows its methodology from New Criticism, Structuralism and Post-structuralism, it challenges their dominance and rejects their contention that the work must be studied in isolation from its context. Context—historical, biographical, cultural, psychoanalytic—is relevant to the understanding of the text. Reader-response theory further rejects the post-structuralist claim that texts are meaningless. Texts may be incomplete in themselves, but the reading of them makes them potentially reflective of the real world—or at least the reader's experience of the real world. Reader-response scholars, like the German critic, Wolfgang Iser, agrees with Jacques Derrida that works contain "gaps" which must be filled. Authors always

leave something unsaid or unexplained and thus invite readers to fill the resulting spaces with their own imaginative constructs. Iser argues, therefore, that many equally valid interpretations of a work are possible. Interpretations of a work will vary from person to person and even from reading to reading.

Some groups of reader-response critics focus on how biographical and cultural contexts influence the interpretation of texts. These critics argue that reading is a collective enterprise. For instance the American critic Stanley Fish states that a reader's understanding of what "literature" is and what works of literature mean is formed by "interpretive communities" (groups to which readers belong). These groups could be small (a circle of friends) or large (a region or cultural entity). Fish rejects the idea that a text has a core of meaning that everyone in any age would accept. Rather, shared understandings of a text's meaning come from the beliefs of a community of readers, not from the text. Each reader's preconceptions actually "create" the text. If, for example, a reader believes that a miscellaneous collection of words is a religious poem, the reader will perceive it as a religious poem. If a reader believes that the work fits a particular theory, the reader will find facts in the work to support that theory. The theory, in a sense, "creates" the facts.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

A literary text is incomplete until it is read. Discuss this assertion in relation to Reader- Response theory.

### **3.3 Criticisms against Reader-Response Theory**

You have been taught that reader-response criticism sees the reader as essential to the interpretation of a work. Each reader is unique, with different educations, experiences, moral values, opinions, and tastes, etc. Therefore, each reader's interaction with a work is unique. A reader-response critic analyses the features of the text that shape and guide a reader's reading. The critic emphasises recursive reading—re-reading for new interpretations. For reader-response critics, each generation has different experiences, values, and issues; hence, each generation will read a work differently. However, reader-response theory has been criticised as being overly impressionistic and guilty of the affective fallacy (too focused on the emotional effect of the work). Other critics have plainly said that it is not intellectual. These attacks have led to the adaptation of another version of reader-response criticism called reception theory.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

What are some of the critique against reader-response theory?

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you learnt that reader-response theory is a school of criticism which maintains that readers actually contribute to the meaning of works of literature. Reader-response theory studies the interaction of reader with the text. Reader-response critics hold that the text is incomplete until it is read. Each reader brings something to the text that completes it and that makes each reading different. For this school of thought, the literary text has no life of its own without the reader.

### 5.0 SUMMARY

As its name implies, reader-response theory focuses on readers' responses to literary texts. Proponents of reader-response theory believe that literature has no objective meaning or existence; rather, readers bring their own thoughts, moods and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to base on their own expectations and ideas. Reader-response theory has been criticised as being overly impressionistic and guilty of the affective fallacy. Some other critics have plainly said that it is not intellectual.

### 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the theoretical tenets of reader-response theory.
2. In what way does the reader contribute to making meaning in a work of literature?

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## UNIT 3 POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Lois Tyson (2006), in *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Manual*, holds that as a domain within literary studies, postcolonial theory is both a subject matter and a theoretical framework. As a subject matter, postcolonial theory analyses literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination, from the first point of colonial contact to the present. Any analysis of a postcolonial literary work, regardless of the theoretical framework used, might be called postcolonial criticism. Postcolonial criticism focuses on the literature of cultures that developed in response to British colonial domination. However, as a theoretical framework, postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally and psychologically—of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies. For example, a good deal of postcolonial criticism analyses the ideological forces that, on the one hand, pressed the colonised to internalise the colonisers' values and, on the other hand, promoted the resistance of colonised peoples against their oppressors, a resistance that is as old as colonialism itself.

Postcolonial criticism is a term which has obviously become globalised. However, a key problem remains in the actual naming. The prefix 'post' raises questions similar to those arising from its attachment to the term 'modernism'. Does 'post' signal a break into a phase and consciousness of newly constructed independence and autonomy 'beyond' and 'after' colonialism, or does it imply a continuation and intensification of the system, better understood as neo-colonialism? According to Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker (2005):

The appearance of postcolonial theory has overlapped with the debates on postmodernism,

though it brings, too, an awareness of power relations between Western and 'Third World' cultures which the more playful and parodic, or aestheticising postmodernism has neglected or been slow to develop. From a postcolonial perspective, Western values and traditions of thought and literature, including versions of postmodernism, are guilty of a repressive ethnocentrism.

In this unit, our aim is to explain the concept of Postcolonialism as well as its theoretical predilections.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define Postcolonialism
- outline the theoretical tenets of Postcolonialism
- list and discuss the leading theorists of Postcolonialism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 The Emergence of Postcolonial Criticism**

Postcolonialism as a literary theory emerged in the late 19th century and thrived throughout the 20th century. Postcolonialism is a literary approach that gives a kind of psychological relief to the people (the colonised) for whom it was born. The focus of the postcolonial critic is to expose the mechanism and the evil effect(s) of that monster called colonialism on the colonised. Colonialism which is the capitalistic and exploitative method by a 'superior' nation (coloniser) to lord itself over a less-privileged nation (colonised) leads to the impoverishment of the latter. The concept of colonialism has political, economic and cultural implications.

Postcolonialism sees literature as an avenue to probe into the history of society by recreating its past experience with the mind of forestalling the repetition of history. The ultimate for the postcolonial critic is to develop a kind of nostalgia about his historical moment that produces a new dawn in his society. Postcolonialism is a dominant feature in African and Caribbean literature as writers in these settings see colonialism as an instrument aimed at reducing them to nonentities. An interesting feature of postcolonial theory is its attempt, not only to expose the oddities of colonialism but to reveal and discuss what the independent nations make of themselves even after the demise of colonialism.

In another sense, postcolonial denotes a period of recovery after colonialism as well as a signification of its ongoing cultural aftermath. Emphasising its ideological predilection, Kehinde argues that: “Postcolonial African novelists use their novels to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about African and her people.. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ashcroft *et al.* aver that postcolonial criticism covers “...all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present”. Awan Ankpa views the concept in like manner as representing “...those fields of significations in which people who had been colonised by Europe struggle to redefine themselves and their environment in the face of Euro-centrism’s epistemological violence”. Thus, viewed from the perspective of a counter-discourse, postcolonial literatures become in the words of Ayo Kehinde “...veritable weapons used to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as ‘Us’ and ‘Them’; ‘First world’ and ‘Third world’; ‘White’ and ‘Black’; ‘Coloniser’ and ‘Colonised’.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

What does postcolonial theory offer the colonised people?

### **3.2 Theoretical Postulations of Postcolonial Theory**

Despite the polemics surrounding the concept of postcolonialism, it is unarguable that the emergence of the ‘Post’ in literary and cultural studies in the 20th Century is a significant development that has radically widened the scope of literary theorising, criticism and interpretation. Depending on the context in which it is employed, ‘post’ connotes both ‘a succession’ as well as ‘a transcending of existing perspectives’. From post-structuralism, post-marxism, postmodernism, to postcolonial criticism, the aim has been to interrogate dominant epistemologies and re-theorise their claims in the light of emerging new knowledge. This is the thrust of Esiaba Irobi’s (2010) argument that postcolonialism is:

A reaction to Western imperialist history and intellectual ideology...It seeks to dismantle the epistemologies of intellectual hegemony cultivated by the west via its academics as well as confront the ex-colonised with the options available for their critical redemption via alternative modes of



discourse which may be different from those traditions of discourse fashioned by the west.

This politics of power and representation by the West which postcolonial criticism seeks to interrogate has been examined critically by the Palestinian scholar, Edward Said, in his influential works, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Known for his anti-colonial stance, Said in both works argues that in order to bolster its claim of superiority, there is a condescending zeal by the West to inferiorise, marginalise and stereotype other history and cultures which it does not understand or which it knows very little about. For him, the West has a limited and over-simplified concept of the 'East' and believes in the supremacy of its values, while relegating the values and cultures of others as 'uncivilised'. Said questions the West's notion of history and authority of knowledge and calls for its re-valuation. Homi Bhabha (1994) in the same mode of thinking posits that colonial ideology rests upon a "Manichaeian structure" that divides the world into dichotomous identity categories of the civil and the barbaric, the "us" and the "them". In his estimation: "the objective of colonialist discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction".

Thus, postcolonial theory on the one hand takes the garb of a counter-canon, a revision of dominant Western postulation about its perceived 'Other'. Elleke Boehmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995) concurs to this thinking. For her, the concept emerged as a 'resistance' to imperial domination:

In writings as various as romances, memoirs, adventure tales or the later poetry of Tennyson, the view of the world as directed from the colonial metropolis was consolidated and confirmed. Thus, it also followed almost automatically that resistance to imperial domination (especially on the part of those who lacked guns or money) frequently assumed textual form.

As a 'radical' literary construct, at least in its ideological commitment, postcolonial theory acquires different significations in the context of African and 'Third World' literature. It is an epistemology which seeks to rupture the absolutist claims of Western epistemology, including its representations of Africa and other 'Third World' countries especially in literary, philosophical and cultural discourses. In other words, postcolonial criticism sets out to 'comment on, and criticise colonial hegemony and the process of decolonisation' in former colonised

nations. The leading postcolonial critics and writers include Homi Bhaba, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Derek Walcott, and J. M. Coetzee.

Edward Ako (2004), tracing the transition of Commonwealth Literature into postcolonial literature, observes that postcolonial critics deal with problems of migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, caste, class, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe, such as history, literature, philosophy, linguistics and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. Thus, in its engagement with literature postcolonial criticism, especially for the 'Third World', is a politico-literary discourse which in the words of Rehnuma Sazzad "opposes the power-knowledge nexus" constructed by the West and devising in the alternative, fresh ways of approaching old epistemologies. Thus, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) epitomises the postcolonial as a counter-narrative to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1902) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) respectively. J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), in the same light, represents a revision of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). These are Western 'Master Texts' which portray distorted images of Africa and its people. Postcolonial criticism therefore takes as part of its objectives the critique of 'Colonial ethos' reflected in 'Colonialist texts'.

Beyond the claims of counter-balancing, the dominant discursive ethos of the West, postcolonial African writers also foreground the political tensions in their emergent independent states. With the failure of political independence to usher in the dividends of democratisation in many African countries, disillusionment has set in, and writers in their works reflect these social dissonances manifested in political instability, ethnic identity, inequality, corruption, abuse of power and leadership failure. The effects and aftermaths of colonisation become a fascinating theme of these writers, including the wide socio-economic inequality in society which often results in conflict. In all, postcolonial critics always share a sense of solidarity with the oppressed and marginalised.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

List prominent postcolonial critics and writers in the "Third World" and state their primary mission.

### **3.3 Criticisms against Postcolonial Theory**

It has been stated that postcolonial theory tilts strongly towards the incorporation of politics into literary theorising. Postcolonial criticism

often interrogates the dichotomy between history and fictional representation, ‘Otherness’ and hybridity and their relationship to issues of identity. However, as a theoretical construct, Postcolonialism provokes both ‘critical acclaim’ and ‘critical bashing’, especially among ‘Third World’ scholars. For instance, the Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare, dismisses it as another form of ‘imperialism of theory’; the Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, rejects it on the grounds that ‘colonialism has not been posted at all’. Aidoo’s observation finds elements of validity as events in many African societies show that neo-colonialism in the form of Western multinational conglomerates is very much alive, pauperising and inflicting hardship on the hapless poor. Advancing Aidoo’s line of thought, Tyson states that another debate engaging the attention of postcolonial critics concerns the politics of their own critical agenda. For example, the term postcolonial criticism implies that colonialism is a thing of the past, while in reality, it is not. Colonialism is no longer practised as it was between the late 15th and mid-20th centuries, through the direct, overt administration of governors and educators from the colonising country. But today, through different means, the same kind of political, economic and cultural subjugation of vulnerable nations occurs at the hands of international corporations from such world powers as the United States, Germany and Japan. Again, there are fears that postcolonial literature will be “colonised”—that is, interpreted according to European norms and standards—by the cultural Euro-centrism that dominates literary education and literary criticism the world over.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE**

Discuss some of the criticisms against postcolonial theory.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you learnt that postcolonial criticism helps us see the connections among all the domains of our experience - the psychological, ideological, social, political, intellectual, and aesthetic - in ways that show us just how inseparable these categories are in our lived experience of ourselves and our world. In addition, postcolonial theory offers us a framework for examining the similarities among all critical theories that deal with human oppression, such as Marxism, and feminism. Postcolonial criticism defines formerly colonised peoples as any population that has been subjected to the political domination of another population; hence postcolonial critics draw examples from the literary works of African Americans as well as from the literature of aboriginal Australians or the formerly colonised population of India.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, we explained that most postcolonial critics analyse the ways in which a literary text, whatever its subject matter, is colonialist or anti-colonialist; that is, the ways in which the text reinforces or resists colonialism's oppressive ideology. For example, in the simplest terms, a text can reinforce colonialist ideology through positive portrayals of the colonisers, negative portrayals of the colonised, or the uncritical representation of the benefits of colonialism for the colonised. Analogously, texts can resist colonialist ideology by depicting the misdeeds of the colonisers, the suffering of the colonised, or the detrimental effects of colonialism on the colonised. Postcolonial criticism pursues not merely the inclusion of the marginalised literature of colonial peoples into the dominant canon and discourse, it also offers a fundamental critique of the ideology of colonial domination and at the same time seeks to undo the "imaginative geography" of Orientalist thought that produced conceptual as well as economic divides between 'West and East', 'civilised and uncivilised', 'First and Third Worlds'. In this respect, postcolonial criticism is in a way activist and adversarial in its basic aims. It is a theory that has brought fresh perspectives to the role of colonial peoples (their wealth, labour and culture) in the development of modern European nation states.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. What is the signification in the prefix 'Post' in Postcolonialism?
2. Outline the theoretical postulations of Postcolonialism.

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