

Literary Theory. First year/ license degree

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Lecture 04/05:

The Nature and Job of Literature According to Literary Theory

Introduction Literature, in its broadest sense, encompasses written works of artistic and intellectual significance. It reflects human experiences, emotions, and ideas, serving as a medium through which societies express their cultural values and grapple with universal questions. From the perspective of literary theory, literature is not merely a collection of texts but a dynamic field of inquiry that engages with the complexities of meaning, language, and interpretation. This lecture will explore the nature and function of literature as articulated in various schools of literary theory, highlighting its multifaceted role in shaping and reflecting human thought and society.

The Nature of Literature

1. Literature as a Construct

- Literature is not an intrinsic or universal category but a construct that varies across cultures and historical periods. For example, structuralist theorists like Roland Barthes argue that literature is defined by its use of language and conventions, which distinguish it from other forms of writing.
- Reader-response theory emphasizes the role of the audience in defining literature. According to theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, a text becomes "literature" only through the active interpretation and engagement of its readers.

2. Literature and Language

- Language is the medium of literature, and its nature is deeply tied to linguistic systems. Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas about the arbitrariness of the sign highlight how literature manipulates language to create new meanings.
- Poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida argue that literature exemplifies the play of language and its inherent instability, challenging fixed meanings and binary oppositions.

3. Literature as a Reflection and Critique

- Mimetic theories, dating back to Aristotle, view literature as an imitation of life, capturing the essence of human experiences and the world.
- However, literature also serves as a critique of society and its ideologies. Marxist theory, as articulated by thinkers like Terry Eagleton, examines literature as a product of its socio-economic context, often critiquing class structures and power dynamics.

The Job of Literature

1. Aesthetic and Emotional Engagement

- Literature provides aesthetic pleasure and emotional resonance. Romantic theorists like Samuel Taylor Coleridge argue that literature appeals to the imagination and offers a sense of wonder.
- It fosters empathy and emotional connection by allowing readers to inhabit diverse perspectives, as noted by phenomenological critics such as Edmund Husserl.

2. Cultural Transmission and Preservation

- Literature acts as a repository of cultural knowledge, preserving traditions, myths, and values for future generations. Anthropological approaches to literature, such as those by Northrop Frye, examine how archetypes and narratives recur across cultures.

3. Challenging Norms and Encouraging Critical Thinking

- Literature disrupts established norms and provokes critical thought. Feminist theorists like Judith Butler highlight how literature can challenge patriarchal structures and offer alternative narratives.
- Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said emphasize the role of literature in resisting colonial ideologies and giving voice to marginalized communities.

4. Exploration of Identity and Subjectivity

- Psychoanalytic theory, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, views literature as a space for exploring the unconscious mind and human subjectivity.
- Modernist and postmodernist texts often interrogate the fluidity of identity, reflecting broader cultural shifts and existential concerns.

Conclusion The nature and job of literature, as examined through literary theory, reveal its profound significance in human life. Literature is not merely a vehicle for storytelling but a complex interplay of language, culture, and thought. It reflects and critiques society, fosters emotional and intellectual engagement, and provides a space for the exploration of identity and meaning. By understanding the insights offered by various literary theories, students can appreciate the richness of literature and its enduring impact on humanity.

Resources

1. Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
2. Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Hill and Wang, 1977.
3. Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
4. Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.
5. Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press, 1957.
6. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

7. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
8. Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.