

## Why Theory?

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“... both the literary text, and our reading of it, happen in history. The suggestion that we might move ‘beyond theory’ is really a longing to get the literary text, and our own reading of it, outside of history, and the limitations and contingencies that history imposes on our thinking.”

— “Thoughts on Being Post-Theory,” Dr Robert Irvine, University of Edinburgh.

### ABSTRACT

“Theory” has been construed as a staple aspect of monitoring, making and comprehending of all forms of Art including Literature since classical times. Accordingly, Literary Theory rather Theory demands a closer examination so as to dispel fallacies / confusions, that might have been experienced by many a beginner in the realms of Literature, Literary Criticism and Theory, and thereby to comprehend its functionality. In the same breath, it is not surprising and unusual to find the study and pursuit of Theory being done more in a parroting and also in a fragmented manner, and in a similar vein more in an unconnected manner without comprehending its moulding and/or shaping of the making and reading of Literature as a form of art, all the while.

Hence the present write-up attempts, in the first place, to interrogate the concept of theory and its role in the making and reading / analyzing / appreciating of Literature as an Art form. While being engaged in this seminal enquiry, the article attempts to differentiate between Literary Theory and Theory, and the consequent expansion of the stature of Literature as an offshoot and being part and parcel of a given Culture (which is the key-component of the matrix / combine of ‘socio-cultural and politico-economic and philosophical’) than merely as a presentation of Life in an imaginative and subjective way on the part of an author.

Thus the present attempt, understandably being engaged in ‘de-familiarizing’ Theory, also attempts to verify the un-tenability of the recently put forward critical / theoretical phenomenon in the saga of Theory, known as, “post-theory,” which might have arisen, perhaps, more as an outrage against the ever-proliferating ‘theories’ that have emanated and / or emanating from European-American Academia.

At the outset, before getting into an interrogative exploration of “Why Theory?” and its umbilical connection with Literature, it must be gladly conceded that “Theory” has provided the necessary rigor and vigour, and perhaps the necessary ‘technical-ambience,’ and

complexity for the studies in Literature as a branch of Humanities. Further, the obvious potential of “Theory” has added to the sanctity of research studies in the domain of Literature on a par with other branches of Humanities and / or Social Sciences:

“...theory was ticket to intellectual and academic legitimacy.” (Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in Wilderness”).<sup>1</sup>

Set against this backdrop, the study of Theory and its functions and near-inevitability for the making and comprehending of Literature, more in a de-familiarizing manner is almost warranted.

### **The interrogative approach: Why Theory?**

But the interrogative approach, ‘Why theory?’ would imply and include the following questions:

- Isn’t interrogative approach to Why Theory exploring the ‘making’ of literature?
- Is literature a “Mimetic” (a la Aristotle) in its making?
- Is literature a Structural making with a Cultural Centre that monitors the two forces of a text?
- Is literature a Post-structural making defying fixed structures as they (the texts) are found to be ‘deconstructed’ always?

Accordingly, perhaps to make a recalling, it is almost obvious to state that Literature as a form of Art has been an approximation and / or reflection of human life, carried out under the close supervision of the cultural and historical dictates of a given society:

“If it will not do to see literature as an 'objective', descriptive category, neither will it do to say that literature is just what people whimsically choose to call literature. For there is nothing at all whimsical about such kinds of value-judgement: they have their roots in deeper structures of belief which are as apparently unshakeable as the Empire State building....” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.14).<sup>2</sup>

In view of this near-obvious underlying condition, it has been found and established that since the classical times, there has been an effort to develop theories which would mould and shape the making and reading of literature. Accordingly, Plato and Aristotle’s celebrated seminal view about art as “mimetic,” of course with contrasting difference between them on the theory “Mimesis.”

In fact the theory of “Mimesis,” notwithstanding the ever-evolving Theory of Art / Literature stands as a point of reference and guidance for comprehending and reading of Literature. However to evaluate the role of Theory in this context, one must look at the nature of literature.

## **Nature of Literature**

A critical look at the nature of Literature reveals that Art / Literature are not innocent and / or incidental. In fact Art / Literature go beyond aesthetics as providers of entertainment and pleasure, and deal with the politics of Culture of the Establishment, incorporating and celebrating the dominant and valid perceptions of life—aesthetic, moral, cultural and political.

Once understood thus, it is not difficult to note a given Culture (the axis / the combine of socio-cultural and politico-economic and philosophical) would come into picture in the guise of Theory to mould and guide the making and comprehending Literature. Hence Art / Literature turn to be tools for the Un-acknowledged Cultural Legislating Mechanism in the hands of the Establishment.

## **Etymological Meaning of the Word “Theory”**

Before venturing further, it may be warranted to note the fundamental meaning of “Theory” which will help us to de-familiarized about it since many a time it (‘Theory’) seems to have been feared and/or taken-for-granted.

“It comes from the Greek ‘theorin,’ which means ‘to look at’ or ‘to observe’ or ‘to speculate.’ That term comes, in turn, from the Greek theoros, ‘a spectator,’ which comes from thea, meaning ‘theater’....” (Online Etymological Dictionary).<sup>3</sup>

“Theoria” indicates a view or perspective of the Greek stage. This is precisely what literary theory offers, though specific theories often claim to present a complete system for understanding literature.

Thus, “Theory” presents **a view or perspective**, but **not a complete system** of understanding literature.

## **Theory as the Underlying Tool**

Hence, while providing a select, though partial, view of a given socio-cultural and politico-economic and philosophical context, Theory remains as a tool to unravel the literary text for comprehending it.

Thus, at this juncture it can be reiterated that **Theory forms the backdrop of Literature and functions as a tool to decipher the same.**

## **The Theory of Poets as Unacknowledged Legislators**

In this context, it will be apt to recall what PB Shelley has stated about poets:

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*).<sup>4</sup>

If poets are legislators legislating certain seminal theories, we observe the emergence of theories such as:

- Plato’s theory of **Mimesis** – art as twice removed from reality
- Aristotle’s theory of **Mimesis** – poets as imitators and creators
- Shakespeare’s theory of “**Holding up a mirror to Nature**”
- Saussure’s theory of **Signification**

## Evolution of Theory

An attempt can be made to trace the evolution of theory through:

- Greek
- Latin
- Swiss
- Russian
- Anglo-American schools

Despite limitations, the ubiquitous presence of theory across literary traditions remains undeniable.

## Mimetic → Formalism → Structuralism → Post-Structuralism

The evolution of literary theory from **Mimesis** → **Formalism** → **Structuralism** → **Post-Structuralism** → **Post-Theory(?)** reflects the democratization of literature and theory.

This democratization leads to:

- inclusive representation of humanity
- multiple interpretative approaches
- emergence of new literary traditions

## Aristotelian Mimetic Theory

Mimesis in literature refers to the imitation and reinterpretation of reality. Aristotle described art as imitation of human actions and life.

Aristotle states:

“Most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation not of men but of an action and of life.” (Aristotle, *Poetics*).<sup>5</sup>

## Example: *Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* exemplifies beauty, truth and goodness through mimetic representation.

Key elements:

- Odysseus, King of Ithaka, returns after the Trojan War
- Penelope remains faithful despite numerous suitors
- Odysseus returns in disguise and tests her fidelity

The narrative celebrates:

- heroism
- manhood
- loyalty
- moral virtue

### **Shakespeare: Holding Mirror Up to Nature**

Shakespeare in *Hamlet* explains that drama should:

“hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature.” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*).<sup>6</sup>

This suggests that literature reflects moral and social truths of the age.

### **Structuralism and the Linguistic Turn**

Structuralism introduced a radical shift:

Meaning is produced through **systems of signs**, not direct reflection of reality.

According to Saussure:

- Signifier → linguistic form
- Signified → concept
- Together → Sign

Meaning is constructed through cultural differences:

- good / bad
- beauty / ugly
- virtue / vice

### **Post-Structuralist Developments**

Post-structuralist thinkers further argued that:

- texts do not reflect stable reality
- meaning is fluid
- interpretation depends on cultural context

## Democratization of Literature

The evolution of theory facilitated the rise of new literary fields:

- Feminist Literature
- Gender Studies
- African Literature
- Postcolonial Literature
- Diaspora Literature
- Modernist and Postmodernist Literature
- Ecocriticism
- LGBTQ Studies

## Conclusion

The saga of Theory represents the complementary existence of Literature and Theory. The idea of **Post-Theory** may simply represent literature functioning without explicit theoretical frameworks.

Nevertheless, literature has always been nurtured by some form of theory that enables interpretation and understanding.

From Aristotle to contemporary times, literature has never been a simple mirror of reality nor strictly bound to a single immutable theory. Instead, literature expresses truth and reality in multiple, subjective and historically situated ways.

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