

WEEK 1

What Is literature?

An Introduction to liberal Humanism



Overview

- **What is theory? What is literature?**
- **liberal humanism**
- **Module teaching, reading, and assessment**

What is theory?

- A system of ideas intended to explain something a process, action, or condition based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained
- E.g. theory of gravity explains not just the falling of an apple, but also explains why we fall down stairs and why a ball rolls downhill
- Abstract way of describing and defining a certain state or action
- Sometimes problematic relationship between theory and reality or practice: do all men really want to kill their fathers and sleep with their mothers, as Freud would have us believe?
- Literary and cultural theory: theories which seek to explain the definition, role, and development of literature and culture in all their forms (fiction, films, social relationships, cultural practices, etc.)

What is literature?

- Theory can help us question what we define as literature and what the function of literature is in our society
- Literature usually defined as written texts; does this make your shopping list literature?
- If not, then what further criteria are there? Does it have to be written in a particular style or format? Does it have to have an underlying message, and if so, who determines that message? Does it have to be written by someone who is what we would call a “professional author”?
- Is the function of literature to record versions of the world around us? Is it a product of reality and of society, or does it create and shape reality and society?
- How can we theorise the meaning of literary works? Is there a particular set of features for which we should look?
- Different theories provide different answers to these questions
- Different theories attribute different characteristics and functions to literature

Liberal Humanism

- Arguably the first theory on literature
- Liberal humanism is not an unchanging, homogeneous, unified essence: the ideas which define it have multiplied and changed somewhat since its inception in the seventeenth century
- But its main original tenets can help us understand its original definition of literature and its functions:

Tenets of Liberal Humanism

- a firm belief in the stable values of literature: that good literature is of timeless significance, that good literature transcends historical limitations and peculiarities, and thus speaks to what is constant in human nature;
- a firm belief that the literary text contains its own meaning within itself, and this meaning can be perceived through close textual analysis without the elaborate process of placing it in socio-political, literary-historical, or autobiographical contexts. This is an essentialist belief in the primacy and self-sufficiency of the text;
- a firm belief that human nature is essentially unchanging, that the same passions, emotions, and situations are seen again and again throughout human history, and that literature thus reveals what is constant in human nature;
- a firm belief that individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our own unique essence, that despite all changes in environment and situation there is always a core identity in each of us that is unchanging and constant;
- a firm belief that the job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between text and reader; critics are those who are specially trained to uncover the subtle, often hidden meanings and symbols in a text

Challenging Liberal Humanism

- Each theory we encounter on this module challenges and problematises these tenets of liberal humanism in its very own ways;
- Each week, we'll pick apart these assumptions that Liberal Humanism makes about literature, readers, writers, and the world around them

Problematising the Tenets of Liberal Humanism

- a belief that there are no stable, unchanging "givens" in the world as we know it, all of the "givens" we have accepted as stable (gender, identity, nationality) are actually fluid and unstable social constructs rather than fixed and reliable essences;
 - a belief that all thinking and investigation is necessarily affected and largely determined by prior ideological commitments; the notion of disinterested enquiry is untenable and often fraudulent;
 - a belief that language itself conditions, limits, and predetermines what we see; reality is constructed through language and at the same time shapes language; language is a tainted - not a clear - window through which we see the world
 - a belief that meaning is jointly created by writers, editors/publishers, texts, and readers and that all meanings are contextual, that there can never be one definitive (fixed and reliable) reading/interpretation
 - a disbelief in all "totalizing" categories, such as the notion that there is a stable category of great or classic books, or the notion that there is a human nature that transcends history, race, gender, class, experience, etc. (these notions of human nature have tended to be Eurocentric, and androcentric, focusing on male, middle-class, white, able-bodied experiences)
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- Each theory that we deal with has its own vision of the structure of the world, the position of literature within that world, and of what literature and literary value are
 - So every two weeks we'll see the world in a different light, not just in relation to literature but also in relation to the things you encounter in your daily lives, from advertisement to TV, music videos, and magazines
 - In short, this module is likely to change how you see the world around you and your role within that world

Teaching, Reading, & Assessment

Teaching

- Weekly lectures and seminars, with two weeks dedicated to each theory
- Lectures will introduce you to theories and explain key points
- Detailed handouts available on Blackboard in advance of each lecture
- Presentation slides also available on Blackboard
- See Blackboard for the list of seminar groups
- In seminars you'll discuss the theories in depth and get to apply them to a variety of texts

Reading

- Henry James, The Turn of the Screw (read by next week at the latest)
- Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), Literary Theory: An Anthology, 2nd edn. (London: Blackwell, 2004)
- Other set reading (see Weekly Reading in Module Handbook) can be found on Blackboard
- Blackboard resources: other helpful theory texts as well as further reading, relevant blogs, news and media

Assessment

ATTENDANCE (5%)

Lecture and seminar attendance will be monitored, and it will be marked as shown in the table below. Attendance is compulsory, not optional, even if you choose not to contribute verbally in seminars. If you are unable to attend a lecture or seminar, you must email your tutor with an apology and explanation as soon as possible. Students with ongoing health problems or other mitigating circumstances may be exempt from the attendance element, but only in explicit agreement with their tutor and the module leader.

Weeks Attended	Grade	Weeks Attended	Grade
24	100%	11	35%
23	95%	10	30%
22	90%	9	25%
21	85%	8	20%
20	80%	7	15%
19	75%	6	10%
18	70%	5	5%
17	65%	4	4%
16	60%	3	3%
15	55%	2	2%
14	50%	1	1%
13	45%	0	0%
12	40%		

PRESENTATION (15%)

As part of your participation and attendance assessment, you must deliver a 10 minute presentation in one seminar in either semester one or semester two. You may choose to present on your own, or you may present together with one other person. The task for your presentation is to apply your chosen theory (see presentation schedule) to a piece of text (this may be a painting, a literary extract or poem, a music video, a political speech, an advertisement, or any other piece of text). You may choose one of the items listed on Blackboard under "Media", or you may choose your own text. You can direct any questions about this assessment directly to your seminar tutor, who can help you choose a suitable text.

ESSAY 1 (40%) + ESSAY 2 (40%)

The written components of your assessment are two 2,000-word essay, one in semester one, and the other in semester two. For each essay, you must choose and answer one of the questions provided (see "Assignments" on Blackboard). In answering your chosen question, you must demonstrate knowledge of both the relevant theory and of how it can be applied to one of the texts studied on the module. This may be The Turn of the Screw, or one of the other extracts or films provided for you as part of the module material.

***** NEXT WEEK *****

Making Meaning: Author, Reader, Text