

# Literary Theory in the Postgraduate Classroom: its role and challenges

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## Abstract

My article discusses the role of literary theory in the postgraduate classroom. It addresses two important questions: “Should we, in today’s so-called post-theory society, continue to teach literary theory?”; and, “in a world in which we deny the existence of absolute truth or facts, and where all things are (seemingly) relative, negotiable and changeable, is there still scope for the idea that a text has an identifiable meaning?” These questions are discussed in the context of a course in literary theory for postgraduate students at Kristianstad University, Sweden.

**Keywords:** Literary theory, postgraduate, aesthetics, meaning interpretation

This article, which was prompted by a licentiate thesis on Iris Murdoch (Källero, 2011) that I examined at Lund University, Sweden explores the role of literary theory in what has been termed the post-theory society (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996). The author of the thesis argues that Murdoch, one of the most admired English novelists of the 50s and 60s, had no need for theory either in her fiction or critical works because she saw literature as truth, a reflection of real life. For Murdoch, it was the task of the writer to provide a new philosophic rhetoric: that is, a creative/moral discourse enabling the philosopher to depict interesting ideas about human nature. Murdoch believed that “all art lies, but good art lies its way to the truth” (Rowe, 2007, p. 159). However, while she saw literary theory as an obstacle to the interpretive potential of the text, she defended her belief in the idea that literature represents something true in human nature. This, of course, is a theory in its own right. Like so many challengers to theory, Murdoch based her writing on a very particular view of literature.

In preparing my examination of the thesis, I asked myself two questions: “should we, in today’s so-called post-theory society, continue to teach literary theory?”; and, “in a world in which we deny the existence of absolute truths or facts, and where all things are (seemingly) relative, negotiable and changeable, is there still scope for the idea that a text has an identifiable meaning?” It is my conviction that the answer to both questions must be “yes” if we are to continue to enjoy the pleasures and challenges of literature and pass these on to future generations.

## The post-theory society

Today’s so-called post-theory society questions the existence of universal truth based on an ontology of fragmented being. Absolute knowledge, it is argued, is unattainable; truth is elusive, relativistic, partial, and inevitably incomplete. According to Stanley Fish, one of the most influential proponents of this position, “Truth itself is a contingent affair and assumes a different shape in the light of differing local urgencies and convictions associated with them” (1995, p. 207). As I hope to demonstrate, however, by teaching literary theory it is possible to demonstrate that most texts can and indeed do contain truths, and while these may not be

absolute, they are nonetheless identifiable if one has knowledge and is given the opportunity to practise text analysis.

Deconstructive criticism (of which more shortly) lies closest to the ideas of the post-theory society, as it challenges the idea that words are capable of bearing meaning and that authors have a distinct purpose in mind when writing. According to the deconstructive critic, any attempt to identify possible truths in a text constitutes misreading. The literary theory course taught at Kristianstad University incorporates deconstruction as an alternative means of understanding texts. Students are encouraged to apply all the forms of criticism taught in the course, including deconstruction. While it is necessary to alert students to the possibility that texts may not contain any absolute truth, and to provide opportunities to test this hypothesis in different texts, it is equally important to equip them with the tools with which to identify truths, ideas and themes where these exist. This is indeed one of the primary goals of the literary theory course taught at Kristianstad University.

## **Literary Theory at Kristianstad University**

Introductory courses in literary theory provide excellent opportunities to teach the basic principles of different literary theories and are valuable forums for discussion and exploration. Using a 2.5-credit course in literary theory taught at Kristianstad University as a starting point, the present article discusses the potential of theory to open up new possibilities for understanding and appreciating literature. The course, in which approximately 75% of the students are Chinese postgraduates, is included in the Master's programme in English (students also take a 2.5-credit course in linguistic theory and a 2.5-credit course in didactic theory). The students' experience of theory as taught in the west is very limited. Teaching Chinese postgraduates not only brings into focus the importance of theory in the classroom but also the present debate on the balance between on the one hand aesthetic analysis, as propounded by among others Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004. Gumbrecht argues for a return to aesthetic analysis as a counter-weight to meaning interpretation, p.2); and on the other hand, meaning interpretation as practised in traditional contemporary criticism. Many of the Chinese students who come to Sweden have a solid background in aesthetic appreciation but limited experience of meaning interpretation. My course demonstrates that there is room for both approaches: the one does not preclude the other. Given that most of the students are already familiar with aesthetic analysis, the focus of my course is on meaning interpretation. Students learn that the primary purpose of literary theory is to forever alter our perspectives, allow us to escape our vanities, and extend the horizon of our limitations.

Throughout the course, I remind students that theory is not an end in itself but a means. The text is and must always be supreme and determines one's choice of theory. Good literary criticism derives from the exploration of one's response to a text, careful selection of a theory, and methodical application of the latter to construct a persuasive argument based on logical reasoning and carefully selected evidence from the text.

As students learn to distinguish between literary theories that are context-based (biographical, historical, new historical), reader-based (reader response), language-based (New Critical and deconstruction) and/or a combination of all three types, for example, feminism and psychological criticism, they begin to understand the mechanisms and consequences of meaning construction (Abrams, 1993; Fjellestad and Wikborg, 1995; Guerin, 1999; Lynn, 2001; Peck,

2002; Richards, 1976). One may ask, for example, how the “close reading”, i.e. analysis of words, images, similes, metaphors, rhymes and alliteration carried out by both the New Critic and deconstructive critic produces such diverse interpretations of the same text, exposing on the hand unity and meaning (New Criticism), and on the other, chaos and absence of theme or meaning (deconstruction). How does one distinguish between “reading” as practised by New Critics and the earlier mentioned “misreading” of the deconstructionists? In what ways do biographical, historical and new historical criticisms complement one another? What are the special advantages of new historicism in terms of understanding the context of the text and the circumstances of its production?

Chinese students often particularly enjoy reader response criticism as they appreciate the opportunity to incorporate personal ideas and experiences in their literary analyses. When they attempt to apply the theory in the take-home examination at the end of the course, however, they discover that it is difficult to sustain an argument based purely on subjective response. We discuss this problem at the oral examination that follows the take-home examination. Students often decide to use reader response as a starting point but base the remainder of their argument on an alternative theory.

Discussions of feminism and psychological criticism provoke particularly heated debate among students who are from a culture that is patriarchal and where independent thinking is still not given as much emphasis as in the west, even if this is gradually changing. I was given pause for thought some years ago when a Chinese student expressed satisfaction with the course but regretted that her marital prospects had been compromised, arguing that her newly-discovered joys of independent thinking might not be appreciated by her future partner.

The students discuss a variety of texts, both prose and poetry. John Milton’s sonnet “When I consider How My Light is Spent” (Luxon, 2011) is a case in point. It is little known in China and gives rise to fruitful class discussions. We consider both the aesthetics and meaning of the poem (it is the latter that is in focus). Classroom discussion focuses on two fundamentally different ways of reading the poem: it is about a man who is losing his sight and wonders how he will continue to exercise his talent as a writer; or it describes someone who has lost contact with his God. This is a form of spiritual blindness; the speaker no longer understands how he can fulfil God’s will. How does one arrive at a particular interpretation, and how well does it comply with the evidence of the text itself?

The students are asked to do a close reading of the text, identifying, for example, opposites, contrasts and ambiguities, e.g. “light” (l. 1) and “dark” (l. 3), “mild” (l. 11) and “yoke” (l. 11), “serve” (l. 11) and “kingly” (l. 12), and “land” (l. 14) and “ocean” (l. 14). For the New Critic, the contrasts and ambiguities form the very basis of the sonnet’s resolution in the final line: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” God is benevolent and can be served even if one is blind or has lost contact with Him because, if one is patient, He will ultimately reveal His will. For the deconstructive critic, on the other hand, the sonnet portrays a world of chaos where no kindness can be expected and where no resolution is or can indeed be offered: whether we rush or wait makes no difference because there is no message of hope to be found in the sonnet. If we have a talent (“that one talent which is death to hide”, l. 3), it can disappear temporarily or even permanently (this is, of course, a reference to the Parable of the Talents in the New Testament. We read the parable in class as few of the students are familiar with the Bible). If

we rush, where do we go? If we wait, will we be alone? If we try to find a meaning in the chaos, what is it, and how do we know that it is genuine?

It is important to demonstrate in class that the close reading of New Criticism and Deconstruction is used for totally different ends. I divide the class into two groups: New Critics and Deconstructionists. The groups debate the merits of their particular approach to the text and we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their interpretations. Both approaches are theoretical and are based on the assumption that there are different ways of reading texts, some of which are more valid than others.

The students are asked to consider how a biographical critic would be interested in the fact that Milton had lost his eyesight by 1651. So what is the light, one may ask? Is it literally “physical” vision? The students reflect on how the poem can illuminate Milton’s life. Some critics believe, for example, that Milton was a misogynist, a domestic tyrant who ruled his daughters with a rod of iron. The poem suggests that Milton thought of the world in terms of slaves and masters: the servant’s job is to serve his master. The latter, on the other hand, shall serve God, by bearing “His mild yoke” (l. 11). In both cases, servant and master, the emphasis is on submissiveness.

How might our interpretation change if we apply historical criticism? How does knowledge of the fact that the poem was written in the aftermath of the English Civil War and the beheading of King Charles 1 in 1649 affect our response? As one deeply involved in politics, who was Latin Secretary and a commentator on many political and religious controversies, Milton felt it his duty to assist his country by using his “one talent”. A basic conflict underlies the poem as the poet recognises that God no longer seems to need his talent.

In what ways can the new historicist offer new and deeper insights into the poem? The issue of blindness would be a central issue for the new historicist, prompting him/her to study medical texts, optics texts and rhetoric to explore how blindness was understood in the seventeenth century. Milton’s blindness might even be considered psychosomatic or feigned: for the new historicist, history is a story, a construct that is both written and re-written. “When I Consider How My Light is Spent” is an immensely rich sonnet that merits careful reading. The deep discussions that result require theoretical awareness in order to do full justice to the different levels of meaning in the sonnet. Even “no meaning” is a particular way of reading a text and thus constitutes a theory in its own right.

## **Consulting Critics**

Theoretical awareness is stimulated not only by providing opportunities for students to apply the different literary theories to selected texts but also by encouraging them to read other critics’ appraisals of well-known literary works. A case in point is Raman Selden’s critique of Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1989, pp. 141-145), which we discuss in relation to feminist criticism. In this short analysis, Selden focuses on the role of the reader in determining the significance of the author’s representations, particularly with regard to male desire/fantasy and the portrayal of women as objects rather than subjects.

The passage chosen by Selden (on p. 163 in the 1953 edition of the novel) describes when Jim unexpectedly starts a relationship with the elegant Christine and decides to drop Margaret, who has earlier been ditched by Catchpole and has tried to commit suicide. Margaret’s reaction

to Jim's decision is described as hysterical: she becomes tense and screams in a high-pitched fashion. Her face is wet with saliva and tears as she collapses on a bed. The hysterical fit is described in detail and with the authority of a medical encyclopaedia. Selden argues that Margaret is objectified and distanced from "all empathy" (p. 144) from the reader. Despite the obvious symptoms of hysteria, Jim does not understand what is going on. The contrast between hysteria and passive observation, according to Selden, "has a clear motive" from a feminist viewpoint (p. 144): it is "part of a calculated objectivity in the description" (p. 144) that serves to emphasise the mysteriousness of women's behaviour. In this way, women are seen not only to be strange creatures but also predictable. The novel is male-oriented, argues Selden, as women are portrayed as the objects of male gaze and are regarded as the "unknown" but also all-too-familiar "other" (p. 144).

The students read the relevant section in the novel and discuss Selden's analysis from the point of view of female stereotypes and the woman's position as "object" rather than "subject". They are encouraged to suggest alternative readings of the passage using the theories discussed on the course. How is our understanding of the text influenced, for example, by knowledge of the life of the author at the time of writing, his relations with women, attitudes to women's rights, and contemporary writing on hysterics, to mention but a few? This session, which comes towards the end of the course, not only enables students to test their ability to apply their knowledge of theory but provides valuable insights into the strengths and limitations of critical analyses.

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Literary theory enables students to discover new horizons, personal and textual, as they explore the presence or absence of truths and learn to evaluate these. As they learn to master deconstructive criticism, they also explore the possibility of absence of meaning in a text. By studying literary theory, students not only become better readers but also more perceptive and persuasive writers. As the literary theory course progresses, the initial insecurity and scepticism of the Chinese students turn to joy as they gradually discover the enormous benefits of literary theory.

Literary theory is not an end in itself but a means of exploring a richer and more challenging world of text in which detail – content, structural and linguistic – are given the attention they deserve. I return to the two questions posed at the beginning: "Is theory important in a post-theory and post-modern world in which truth is negotiable?"; and, "do texts have identifiable meanings?" The answer must be "yes" in both cases, not only for students as readers and writers, but for the future of literature as a whole. Literature is one of the most important bearers of truth about what it means to be a human-being. Only readers trained in literary theory can unlock its full meaning. Literary theory is needed now more than ever if we are to continue to enjoy the beauty, challenges and richness of literature in a world that is both sceptical and challenges the very existence of identifiable truth. Without literary theory, we are caught in an interpretive trap created by our own too hasty judgements and narrow view. In the majority of cases, text has a meaning. As teachers, it is our duty to help students to discover and pass on the secrets of meaning interpretation in order to ensure that our world will continue to be enriched by the pleasures and challenges of literature.

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