



The Future of Literary Theory

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Sometime during my Undergraduate course, it so happened that certain ‘buzzwords’ superseded every other engagement in relevance. I use the term consciously to refer to ideas that have already been condensed from a larger context of immense and rich theory. Such ‘buzzwords’ approved by general academic opinion become ‘tools’ for reading/ interpreting a literary text of choice while remaining content with a vague understanding of the concepts. Due to this disconnect, I could only realize quite late that there was a problem in how I was dealing with Theory. Thus, when the question about the problems of teaching Theory was presented as a part of the Round Table discussion, my response was not devoid of a personal bias due to my personal experience as a contemporary learner. From a learner-oriented perspective, it was mainly this “disconnect” that I attempted to highlight. It was only during a very specific moment in the Round Table for the Conference that a statement came as a revelation. “One does not simply learn theory. Instead, it is such that one must arrive at theory.” Therein lay the undiscovered missing piece for most contemporary learners – *internalization of theory*.

The exploration of Literary Theory and Criticism, as discussed in the Round Table conference, not only revealed the internal journey one must undertake to ‘arrive at theory’ but also empowered another crucial realization. It concretized the possibility of being able to externalize theory as well as the realization that to decipher the language of theory, this knowledge had to be made available first and foremost. To the contemporary learner, Literary Criticism and Theory have, at this point, assumed a form quite intimidating to tackle with an unfortunately evident rigidity of pedagogy. An obvious stagnation lies in this process; the subject has become almost orthodox in nature.

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Through teaching by philosophers rather than philosophy, it seems impossible to promote any interest as it leads to a conditioning of taking the text as factual. It appears to contemporary scholars as a yardstick one uses to evaluate texts. The intent of Literary Theory and Criticism, as per a personal understanding, is to facilitate critical thinking. Since this is lost in translation in classroom spaces among future academicians, initiating a conversation about the problems in engaging with Theory becomes important.

One of the major problems is related to the rigid curriculum structure and constriction of the pedagogy, which is unable to prompt thought beyond the text. It is currently unable to reflect and allow intellectual engagement. However, even with the emphasis on the historical and foundational concepts that must be maintained, immediate exposure to these theories alienates a beginner's mindset. The curriculum must not be restricted by simply including chronological categories. Contextualization becomes important when schools are introduced as isolated in chronology, where it appears that important thinkers have responded to concepts simply linearly. The vacuum that reading theory and criticism is lost in owes its causation to the fact that theory is read without a counter-theory. As this leads to the impression that Theory is absolute, it hinders the want for discourse and, thus, practical insight from critical engagement. Literary Theory has gained a rather formulaic status. For example, it is common for learners to rely on a theory like 'X' to deduce only one particular reading 'Y,' like Feminist Criticism and Womanhood. This results in a complete ignorance of the nuances of such schools which are intricately linked in the web of thought relations.

Content has vastly evolved to accommodate unprecedented concepts. For example, Derrida chose his theory to be primarily applied to the text he took for dissection. Yet, Deconstruction has since been commonly applied to texts, including video games. Possibilities of this kind have not yet been exposed in a learning space. With skill-based approaches emphasized among contemporary learners, limited understanding of theory and unstimulated critical thinking in classrooms make the study fall short of its purpose. Assessment methods add to the cementation of this formulaic nature of the teaching process. Due to this reason, most learners who have been

conditioned to be goal-oriented can meet requirements when they are assessed despite not completely engaging with theory. It becomes a problem when scholars are unable to see a future for Literary Criticism outside the classroom. This appears to be a lack of practicality, which makes this course seem idealistic, which it is very much not. When assessment and evaluation of the subject cannot incite creativity, practical and analytical application, it offers an easy way out with general and vague responses, applicability is not tested as much as familiarization with the text is. This has made the subject thoroughly institutionalized and leaves no space to encourage thinkers. The comprehensive power of learners does not reach its potential due to a lack of discourse, contemporary and simultaneous.

However, it is acknowledged that Theory and Criticism cannot be approached with a 50-minute classroom mindset in 'perfect form' where Literary Theory and Criticism go together. The connection and the distinction between the two, warrant excessive exploration, something that learners now may feel disengaged with due to a multitude of factors that have been briefly touched upon in this essay. Even with the constraints of time and standardization of the subject, this leaves various possibilities to explore. To encourage critical engagement of learners and sustain Literary Theory and Criticism as a subject, it requires more accessibility. It might be possible to overwrite its initially lofty impression by extending the assessment requirement to cover more interpretation than retention and to offer more choice in terms of the medium of this interpretation. Due to the unavoidable aspect of time constraints and several other variables that instructors face, it might ease the process to divide the workload and integrate workshops often, which would benefit both the learner and the instructor while contributing directly to an exchange of resources. Moreover, though the lectures are essential, including spaces for discourse through group debates within the classroom would become a key solution in encouraging critical engagement.