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Literary and Critical Theory I

SEMESTER IV

ENGLISH

BLOCK 1

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SEMESTER 4
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 1: LITERARY AND CRITICAL THEORY I
BLOCK 1: THEORITICAL APPROACHES I

DETAILED SYLLABUS

CONTENTS **Pages**

Unit 1 : The Rise of Literary and Critical Theory **7-20**

The Rise of Literary Theory, The Rise of Critical Theory, Influence of Theory on Literary Practices, Reading from the 'Preface' of *Literary Theory: The Basics,* Reading from the 'Introduction' From David Lodge & Nigel Wood's *Anthology*, Reading from "The Return to Philology" by Paul de Man (from *Norton Anthology*)

Unit 2 : Russian Formalism **21- 46**

The Tradition of Russian Formalism, The Russian Formalist Critics—Roman Jakobson, Yuri Tynyanov, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Vladimir Propp, Mikhail Bakhtin, Major Concepts, Reception of Russian Formalism

Unit 3 : Structuralism **47-73**

Introducing Structuralism, Major Thinkers of Structuralism—Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Gerard Genette, Jonathan Culler, Important Concepts, Influence of Structuralism.

Unit 4 : Post Structuralism & Deconstruction **74-91**

Introducing Poststructuralism, Major Thinkers of Poststructuralism—Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Key Concepts in Derrida's Deconstruction, Key Concepts in Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Key Concepts of Foucault, Reception of Poststructuralism

Unit 5 : New Historicism and Cultural Materialism **92-113**

Introducing New Historicism, Major Theorists—Stephen Greenblatt, Introducing Cultural Materialism, Major Theorists—Raymond Williams, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Reception of These Theories

COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is the first Course of Semester 4. In this Course, we shall read about Literary Theory and Critical Theory in terms of its various approaches and concepts. When we read through the units in this course, we shall gain more insights into the theoretical and critical trends included in this course. Since, it is not possible to write in significant detail about the theoretical approaches, we have, in this course, only tried to provide you with the very basic information regarding each of the approaches. Besides, the units are only informative and no attempt has been made to critically analyse the approaches.

Modern Theories of Criticism describes traditional types of literary theory and of applied criticism from Aristotle through the early 20th century. However, since World War I, and especially since the 1960s, there have appeared a large number of innovative literary theories and methods of critical analysis, including revised and amplified versions of the earlier forms of Marxist criticism and Psychoanalytic criticism. As M. H. Abrams in his Glossary has pointed out, we can have the following table of the approximate time when these modes became prominent in literary criticism:

1920s and 1930s Russian Formalism
1930s and 1940s Archetypal Criticism.
1940s and 1950s New Criticism; Phenomenological Criticism.
1960s Structuralist Criticism; modern forms of Feminist Criticism; Stylistics.
1970s Theory of the Anxiety of Influence; Deconstruction; Discourse Analysis; various forms of Reader-Response Criticism; Reception Theory; Semiotics; Speech-act theory.
1980s Dialogic Criticism; New Historicism; Cultural Studies.
1990s Postcolonial Studies; Queer

In Course 4 of Semester 2, we have already discussed Literary Criticism upto New Criticism in sufficient details. However, as intended, the units 1-15 of this course shall help you to discuss what is usually known as Literary and Critical Theory. But, these units are never supposed to be complete in itself. Because, the vast world of literary theories can never be narrowed down like the way we have tried in the different units of this Course. However, we have made all possible attempts to simplify the things so that you understand them and apply them in your analysis of a literary text. Certain paragraphs are directly adapted from certain important books in the field. This has been done to help you have some direct impression on what the different theorists and their critics have to say regarding a particular theoretical trend. For a better understanding of Literary and Critical theory, we have recommend certain books enlisted in the Reference at the end of each Block. You will do really well, if you can get hold of the books referred and read them of your own, and try to see for yourself the world of theory and how it has enriched the various processes of interpretation in the last decades of the 20th century.

This course is divided into three Blocks. **Block 1** shall deal with Theoretical Approaches I, **Block 2** shall deal with Theoretical Approaches II, and **Block 3** shall help you to discuss some Theoretical Concepts.

BLOCK 1: INTRODUCTION

While discussing Literary and Critical Theory it is very important to understand the basic premises of the theoretical approaches, besides making an attempt at tracing the growth and development of Literary and Critical Theory. This Block therefore begins with an introductory unit on the Rise of Theory as a way of interpretation in the field of literary studies. However, this **Block** contains a total of five units, the details of which are as the following:

Unit 1: In this unit, we shall try to discuss the meaning of Literary and Critical Theory, how they developed, what they do or how they have influenced and provided scope to analyse literary practices.

Unit 2: In this unit, we shall discuss some basic ideas of Formalist criticism with reference to Russian Formalism which became prominent in the early part of the 20th century. Formalist criticism is not interested in the feelings or the biography of poets, nor is it concerned with the responses of readers. We shall learn that Formalism is concerned mostly with artistic structure and form that influenced the way we should engage ourselves with literary works.

Unit 3: In this unit, we shall discuss Structuralism that refers first to a broad intellectual movement signifying various ways of theorizing in the 'human sciences' of the 20th century; and then, to a particular set of approaches to literature and other cultural art forms which flourished in France during 1960s. It tries to map the structures that are the actual carriers of meaning and the various relations between the elements within those structures. Structuralism bases its premises on the 'constructed' nature of all human activity and its products.

Unit 4: In this unit, we shall deal with Poststructuralism which is both a continuation and critique of Structuralism. A term that became a popular critical and theoretical usage during 1970s, it is not a unified school of thought or movement. What makes Poststructuralist theory a relevant way of looking at the contemporary world of change is the 'erasure' or weakening of divisions between 'signifier' and 'signified', reading and writing, literature and criticism. As we finish reading the unit, we shall not only be able to discuss Post structuralism and its major exponents but shall also make ourselves comfortable to understand the difficult concepts usually studied along with Post structuralism.

Unit 5: In this unit, we shall get to learn about New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. New Historicism designates a kind of writing marked by components such as rejection of the compartmentalisation of disciplines, attention to economic and historical contexts of culture, self-reflexivity in the act of writing about culture, and intertextuality of texts and discourses and so on. Cultural Materialism, on the other

hand, is a theoretical approach to literature that stresses the interaction between cultural creations such as literature and their historical context that also includes social, political and economic elements.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in “LET US KNOW” along with the text. We have kept “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the “FURTHER READINGS” which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 1: THE RISE OF LITERARY AND CRITICAL THEORY

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 The Rise of Literary Theory

1.4 The Rise of Critical Theory

1.5 Influence of Theory on Literary Practices

1.5.1 Reading from the 'Preface' of *Literary Theory: The Basics*

1.5.2 Reading from the 'Introduction' in David Lodge & Nigel Wood

1.5.3 Reading from "The Return to Philology" by Paul de Man (Norton Anthology)

1.6 Let us Sum up

1.7 Further Reading

1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.9 Possible Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the terms 'Literary Theory' and 'Critical Theory'
- discuss how these theories developed
- write about what these theories do
- discuss how such theories influenced literary practices in the 20th the century

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is an introductory unit of the course on Literary Theory, which is also the first Course in MA English 4th Semester. In this unit, we shall try to discuss the meaning of Literary and Critical Theory, how they developed, what they do or how they have influenced and provided scope to analyse literary practices. These are important issues but not so easy to understand. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, in their groundbreaking *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory: Key Critical Concepts* has offered the

following comments: “Literary theory is an unavoidable part of studying literature and criticism. However, theory especially when it takes the form of ‘isms’ can often be intimidating or else, frankly, boring.” Critical Theory, on the other hand, reflects assessment and critique of society and culture by applying knowledge derived from social sciences and the humanities. As a term, Critical Theory has two meanings with different origins and histories: the first originated in Sociology and the second originated in Literary Criticism, whereby it is used and applied as an umbrella term that can describe a theory founded upon critique; thus, the theorist Max Horkheimer described a theory as critical insofar as it seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.” As we finish reading this unit, we shall be able to identify most of the major theoretical schools or tendencies in contemporary criticism, and then to understand how they developed and how they have been suggesting different ways to interpret literature.

1.3 THE RISE OF LITERARY THEORY

Julian Wolfrey, in his *Introducing Literary Theories: A Guide and Glossary* states that historically, literary theory, as a convenient term or label, defines works influenced by the practices, discourses and texts of Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Linguistics, Semiotics (the study of signs) and continental philosophy of the last 40 years of the 20th century, including the ideas and approaches gathered together under the label Structuralism and Poststructuralism. This last term is a particular example of a now widespread ‘ism’ generated during the late 1960s in the Anglo-American academic world for the purpose of identifying a quite often radically heterogeneous range practices of critics, philosophers, historians and psychoanalysts. Literary theory, owned as belonging to both literary criticism and literary studies, has come into being as a subject on the curriculum during the same period. Literary Theory has been therefore the name given to a number of different, differing, occasionally overlapping or related ways of reading and interpreting, and is defined thus for economical purposes,

first within the university, and subsequently beyond the university, in publishers catalogues, in reviews, journals and news media.

Here, we can also refer to what Terry Eagleton has to say about Literary Theory. In his 'Introduction' to *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton writes, "Theory was a way of emancipating literary works from the stranglehold of a 'civilised sensibility', and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at least, anyone could participate. Those who complain of the difficulty of such theory would often, ironically enough, not expect to understand a textbook of biology or chemical engineering straight off. Why then should literary studies be any different? Perhaps because we expect literature itself to be an 'ordinary' kind of language instantly available to everyone; but this is itself a very particular 'theory' of literature. Properly understood, literary theory is shaped by a democratic impulse rather than an elitist one; and to this extent, when it *does* lapse into the turgidly unreadable, it is being untrue to its own historical roots."

From the above we understand that Literary theory is the name given to a range of disparate critical practices and approaches, which are used by members of the humanities in the exploration of literary texts, films, and aspects of contemporary and past cultures. Literary theory is also the name given to the teaching of such practices and approaches in the universities across the world, particularly in the English departments. Theory is, thus, an umbrella term, which brings together insights from Feminists, Marxists and from those who teach literature but are interested in certain branches of Linguistics, Psychoanalysis or Philosophy.



LET US KNOW

20th century literary criticism and theory developed in terms of simultaneous developments in allied fields. From your reading of Course 4 of Semester 2, we have already, discussed a range of ideas in New Criticism, Formalism, and in the work of critics like T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards, among several others. We also noted that the sequence of developments in literary criticism of the 20th century is not easily charted

along a well-defined time-line. So, even while some critics were formulating important concepts in the study of literary texts, other developments in Europe, for example, were giving rise to newer, more radical concepts, which often come under what may be called Literary Theory. Subsequently, there developed even more radical concepts such as—Structuralism, Post structuralism, Deconstruction, Postmodernism, New historicism, Foucault's Discourse-theory and so on, all of which emerged from a concern with discourses, texts, or language. All these meant that disciplines like philosophy or historiography, the preoccupation was with language or linguistic constructions, rather than with historical fact, and all these have their own particular reasons for emergence.

However, we should pay particular attention to the fact that Literary Theory itself has become a potent discipline cutting across boundaries to decide "the conduct of enquiry in numerous other fields of thought." We see this extended influence in areas like ethnography, psychoanalysis, political theory, gender-studies, theology, anthropology, postcolonial historiography, and ethics and so on. Literary theory is fashionable, exciting, and liberating in many ways. With 'literary theory', we can afford to discuss literary texts in newer ways and to explore new concepts. In many ways, literary theory has become one of those disciplines that have thrust English literary studies into fresh interdisciplinary areas giving it a formidable reputation of analytical ability.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Provide the meaning of literary theory.

Q 2: How does Terry Eagleton define the concept of Literary Theory?

Q 3: How has Literary Theory influenced interpretations of literary texts?

1.4 THE RISE OF CRITICAL THEORY [Taken from David Macey's book]

The term Critical Theory can be loosely used to refer to a whole range of theories which often take a critical view of society and the human sciences or which seek to explain the emergence of the objects of knowledge. However, more significantly, the term also refers to the major strands in the works of the Frankfurt School and particularly to the works of Theodor Adorno and M. Horkheimer. However, it is Jurgan Hebermas who is the most important contemporary spokesman of critical theory. Horkheimer in his inaugural address in 1931 to Institute for Social Research broadly defined critical theory as a human activity that takes society as its object, and that attempts to transcend the tensions between individual spontaneity and the work process relationship s on which our society is based. Critical theory takes as its starting point the works of Marx and Freud, and an analogy is often drawn between the Marxist theory of ideology as illusion and the individual delusions analysed by Freud in The Future of Illusion (1972) where he speaks of the middle class Viennese girl's delusion that a prince will come and marry her. Critical theory would seek to dispel her delusion by giving her a critical and self-critical awareness of why such a marriage is improbable.

Raymond Guess (1981) who made a systematic survey of the works of Habermas and the Frankfurt School, stated that Critical Theory is emancipatory and provides guide to human action and unlike a scientific theory, is self conscious, self critical and non-objectifying. Critical Theory takes the form of a critique of ideology that seeks to explain why social agents accept or consent to systems of collective representations that do not serve their objective interests but legitimate the existing power structure. The object of a critical theory such as Marxism is to supply the knowledge of the necessity of transforming the present social order into a classless society. It does not however predict the inevitability of that transformation and merely points to what ought to be done rather than to what will happen.

The goal of critical theory is to preclude the emergence of such a society by demonstrating that a transition to a freer and more fulfilling society

is objectively or theoretically possible, and then by demonstrating that the existing state of society is unsatisfactory and frustrating that it ought to be transferred. The important proviso is that transformation can come about only if social agents can accept the theses of critical theory as a form of self-consciousness that can act as a guide to emancipator action.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What does Critical theory usually do?

Q 5: State the goal of Critical Theory?

1.5 INFLUENCE OF THEORY ON LITERARY PRACTICES

We shall, in this section, try to understand the impact of Literary Theory on literary practices through a reference to some extracts taken directly from some of the representative texts in the field.

1.5.1 Reading from the 'Preface' of *Literary Theory: The Basics* by Hens Bertens

There was a time when the interpretation of literary texts and literary theory seemed two different and almost unrelated things. Interpretation was about the actual meaning of a poem, a novel, or a play, while theory seemed alien to what the study of literature was really about because its generalisations could never do justice to individual texts. In the last thirty years, however, interpretation and theory have moved closer and closer to each other. In fact, for many contemporary critics and theorists interpretation and theory cannot be separated at all. They would argue that when we interpret a text we always do so from a theoretical perspective, whether we are aware of it or not, and they would also argue that theory cannot do without interpretation.

The premise of *Literary Theory: The Basics* is that literary theory and literary practice–the practice of interpretation–can indeed

not very well be separated and certainly not at the more advanced level of academic literary studies. One of its aims, then, is to show how theory and practice are inevitably connected and *have* always been connected. The emphasis is on the 1970s and after, but important earlier views of literature get their full share of attention. This is not merely a historical exercise. A good understanding of, for instance, the New Criticism that dominated literary criticism in the United States from the mid 1930s until 1970 is indispensable for students of literature. Knowing about the New Criticism will make it a lot easier to understand other, later, modes of reading. More importantly, the New Criticism, like other more traditional approaches to literature, has by no means disappeared. Likewise, an understanding of what is called structuralism makes the complexities of so-called poststructuralist theory a good deal less daunting and has the added value of offering a perspective that is helpful in thinking about culture in general.

[i]n the field of literary studies a whole range of approaches and theoretical perspectives, political and apolitical, traditional and radical, old and new, operate next to each other in relatively peaceful coexistence. In its survey of that range of positions, *Literary Theory: The Basics* tries to do equal justice to a still actual tradition and to the radicalness of the new departures of the last decades. We still ask 'what does it mean?' when we read a poem or novel or see a play. But we have additional questions. We ask 'what does it mean to whom?' And 'why does it mean what it means?' Or, more specifically, 'who wants it to have this meaning and for what reasons?'

1.5.2 Reading from the 'Introduction' in David Lodge & Nigel Wood's *Anthology*

What is Structuralism—or perhaps one should ask, what was Structuralism? In the opinion of many qualified judges, structuralism is a thing of the past – was already in terminal decline by the time the English-speaking world became aware of its

existence in the late 1960s. We live in the age of post-structuralism—but to understand *that* we must know what came before. Structuralism is, or was, a movement in what Continental Europeans call 'the human sciences', which sought to explain and understand cultural phenomena (from poems to menus, from primitive myths to modern advertisements) as manifestations of underlying systems of signification, of which the exemplary model is verbal language itself, especially as elucidated by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. One can trace a line from Saussure to the Russian Formalists, from the Russian Formalists (via Roman Jakobson) to the Prague Linguistic Circle, and from there to the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the eruption of *la nouvelle critique* in Paris in the 1960s.

'Theory' has more than one meaning in this context. Structuralism has generated in literary critics a much greater interest in, and anxiety about, the theory of their own subject (what is sometimes called, after Aristotle, poetics) than was formerly the case, at least in Britain and America. However, the recent theorisation of literary studies has borrowed its terms and concepts very largely from other disciplines — linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, Marxism. In the process, literary criticism has been drawn into the vortex of a powerful new field of study in which all these disciplines are merged and interfused, and which goes under the general name of 'theory'. The aim of this collective enterprise would appear to be nothing less than a totalizing account of human consciousness and human culture (or else a tireless demonstration of the impossibility of such a project). A good deal of what goes on in university departments of language and literature nowadays, and is written in journals ostensibly dedicated to literary criticism, is contributing to Theory in this wide sense.

This development, predictably, has created strains and stresses within the institutional structures that contain and maintain the academic study of literature. In the Foreword to *20th Century*

Literary Criticism felt obliged to rebut the view that students should be discouraged from reading criticism because, by supplying them with ready-made interpretations and judgments, it was likely to blunt their capacity for independent response to primary texts. The complaint more commonly heard today is that modern criticism's obsession with theory undermines the study of literature in a more fundamental way, by questioning its very foundations, such as the idea of the author as origin of a text's meaning, the possibility of objective interpretation, the validity of empirical historical scholarship and the authority of the literary canon.

By no means, all of modern critical theory is hostile to these traditional humanist principles, but much of it certainly is, and it is easy to understand the anxiety that provokes this complaint. A premature and dogmatically enforced exposure to post-structuralist theory can be confusing and disabling to the student. I am sure, however, that the answer is not to try and ignore or suppress the existence of theory. We have eaten the apple of knowledge and must live with the consequences.

Literary criticism can no longer be taught and practised as if its methods, aims and institutional forms were innocent of theoretical assumptions and ideological implications. What is essential, however, is that the new theoretical self-consciousness should be earned, not borrowed, that it should be based on a study of the seminal texts that gave rise to it. These are, for the most part, difficult texts, and coming to grips with them, seeking to understand them, is an educative process in itself, whether or not one accepts their conclusions.

There are numerous guides to structuralism and post-structuralism now available, and introductions to the work of individual critics and theorists. These publications are often extremely useful, but they are no substitute for the texts upon which they comment, though paradoxically they are often cheaper and easier to obtain. There are also several critical anthologies, which represent particular

types of criticism, such as deconstruction, or reader-response criticism. *Modern Criticism and Theory* aims to provide within the covers of a single book a selection of important and representative work from

1.5.3 Reading from "The Return to Philology" by Paul de Man (from *Norton Anthology*)

The quarrelsome tone that hangs over the debates on the teaching of literature can often be traced back to the advent of contemporary literary theory. This is certainly not surprising. Whenever new approaches or techniques are being advocated, a very understandable ill-humour overcomes those who feel they may have to modify or to reconsider well-established pedagogical habits that served them well until the most recent troublemakers came along. However, the polemical response in the case of contemporary theory, and especially of some of its aspects runs deeper.

It feeds not only on civilised conservatism but on moral indignation. It speaks with an anxiety that is not only that of a disturbed tranquillity but of a disturbed moral conscience. Nor is this mood confined to the opponents of theory. Its protagonists, in most cases, are just as nervous. When they appear not to be, their self-assurance often seems to be dependent on utopian schemes. The well-established rationale for the professing of literature has come under fire.

Small wonder that it chooses to shoot back. Ever since the teaching of literature became an autonomous academic field (and we are frequently reminded that this is a fairly recent development, going back no further than the late nineteenth century) it has justified itself as a humanistic and historical discipline, allied to yet distinct from the descriptive sciences of philology and rhetoric. Its ambitions, however, go beyond mere description. It not only has its own national and comparative history but, since it deals with a relatively stable canon of specific texts, it should be a model for the other historical

sciences whose subject matter is less clearly defined. Moreover, it has the task of determining the meaning of texts and this hermeneutic function establishes its kinship with theology.

Finally, as a depositor of human experience of considerable variety and scope, it gains access to questions of moral philosophy-questions of value and of normative judgment. Its technical and descriptive aspects as a science of language dovetail with its historical, theological and ethical function. The professor of literature has good reasons to feel appeased; his scientific conscience is satisfied by the positive rigor of his linguistic and historical knowledge while his moral political and (in the extensive sense) religious conscience is assuaged by the application of this knowledge to the understanding of the world, of society and of the self. The didactics of literature could legitimately hope to be exemplary for interdisciplinary humanistic studies. Neither is this hope incompatible with literary theory and literary criticism: some forms of theory especially those, which continue a tradition of aesthetic speculation that, in the field of English, can be traced back to Coleridge to fully confirm these expectations.

Literary theory raises the unavoidable question whether aesthetic values can be compatible with the linguistic structures that make up the entities from which these values are derived, Such questions never ceased to haunt the consciousness of writers and philosophers, They come to the fore in the ambivalent rejection of rhetoric at the very moment that it was being used and refined as never before, or in the assimilation of the considerable aesthetic charge emanating from rhetorical tropes to the aesthetic neutrality of grammar, It is by no means an established fact that aesthetic values and linguistic structures are incompatible, What is established is that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question and that the manner in which the teaching of literature, since its beginning in the later nineteenth century, has foreclosed the question is unsound, even if motivated by the best of intentions, What also

ought to be (but is not) established is that the professing of literature ought to take place under the aegis of this question, From a purely methodological point of view, this would not be difficult to achieve, It would invoke a change by which literature, instead of being taught only as a historical and humanistic subject, should be taught as a rhetoric and a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a history. The institutional resistances to such a move, however, are probably insurmountable. For one thing, it changes departments of English from being large organisations in the service of everything except their own subject matter into much smaller units, dedicated to the professional specialisation that Professor Bate deplores, It also requires a change in the rationale for the teaching of literature, away from standards of cultural excellence that, in the last analysis, are always based on some form of religious faith, to a principle of disbelief that is not so much scientific as it is critical, in the full philosophical sense of the term, One sees easily enough why such changes are not likely to occur. Yet with the critical cat now so far out of the bag that one can no longer ignore its existence, those who refuse the crime of theoretical ruthlessness can no longer hope to gain a good conscience. Neither, of course, can the theorists-but, then, they never laid claim to it in the first place.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this introductory unit, we have tried to discuss the concept of Literary and Critical Theory and how they have influenced literary interpretations through a reading of some important extracts taken from Hens Bertens, David Lodge & Nigel Wood and Paul de Man respectively. We have learnt that Literary Theory, which became popular in the 20th century, is a body of ideas and methods we use in the reading of literature. Thus, by literary theory, we actually refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the rules or theories that reveal what literature can mean. Literary theory refers to the description of the underlying principles, or tools,

by which we attempt to understand literature. We have understood that Literary theory has formulated the relationship between author and work. However, with the emergence of Critical Theory, we have understood, that a particular work of art becomes more a product of a society and culture than an individual author and in turn, that text helps to create the culture to which it belongs. Our understanding of Literary and Critical Theory will help to discuss understand the following units of the Course in a better way.



1.7 FURTHER READING

Bertens, Hans. (2007). *Literary Theory: The Basics*. (2nd Edn.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

Habib, M.A.R. (2005). *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present.* UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Lodge, David & Nigel Wood. (Eds.). (2003). *Modern Criticism and Literary Theory: A Reader.* New Delhi, Pearson Education Ltd.

Macey, David. (2000). *Dictionary of Critical Theory.* London: Penguin Books.

Makaryk, Irena R. (Ed.). (1993). *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms.* Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Vincent B. Leitch. (Gen Ed.). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton and Company, Inc.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Literary Theory refers to different, differing, and overlapping ways of reading and interpreting… …it is the name given to a range of disparate critical practices and approaches, used for the exploration of literary texts, films, and aspects of contemporary and past cultures… …it is also the name given to the teaching of such practices and approaches in the universities across the world.

Ans to Q 2: Theory was a way of emancipating literary works from the stranglehold of a 'civilised sensibility', and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at least, anyone could participate.

Ans to Q 3: Literary Theory has become a potent discipline cutting across boundaries to decide the conduct of enquiry in numerous other fields of thought… …literary theory is fashionable, exciting, and liberating in many ways… …this has enabled us to discuss literary texts in newer ways.

Ans to Q 4: Critical Theory refers to a range of theories which often take a critical view of society and the human sciences… …seeks to explain the emergence of the objects of knowledge… …also refers to the major strands in the works of the Frankfurt School and particularly to that of Theodor Adorno and M. Horkheimer.

Ans to Q 5: The goal is to preclude the emergence of a society by demonstrating that a transition to a freer and more fulfilling society is objectively or theoretically possible… …it seeks to demonstrate that the existing state of society is unsatisfactory and frustrating that it ought to be transferred.



1.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What does literary theory usually do? Write a note on the rise of literary theory.

Q 2: What are the causes in the emergence of Critical Theory. Discuss.

Q 3: In what way, have literary and cultural theories influenced the interpretation of literature?

Q 4: With the emergence of Critical Theory, we have understood, that a particular work of art becomes more a product of a society and culture than an individual author. Discuss.

Q 5: Literary theory refers to the description of the underlying principles, or tools, by which we attempt to understand literature. Discuss.

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UNIT 2: RUSSIAN FORMALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Introducing Russian Formalism

2.4 The Russian Formalist Critics

- 2.4.1 Roman Jakobson (1896-1982)
- 2.4.2 Yuri Tynyanov (1894-1943)
- 2.4.3 Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984)
- 2.4.4 Boris Tomashevsky (1890-1957)
- 2.4.5 Boris Eichenbaum (1886-1959)
- 2.4.6 Vladimir Propp (1895-1970)
- 2.4.7 Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)

2.5 Major Concepts

- 2.5.1 Literariness
- 2.5.2 Form and Content
- 2.5.3 Fabula and Syuzhet
- 2.5.4 Defamiliarisation

2.6 Reception of Russian Formalism

2.7 Let us Sum up

2.8 Further Reading

2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

2.9 Possible Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- trace the traditions of Formalist criticism
- make a list of the major figures of the movement and understand their contributions
- examine the concepts popularised by the critics and theorists in question

- discuss Russian Formalism as an important trend in Literary Theory

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have tried to understand the concept of Literary and Critical Theory. In this unit, we shall discuss some basic ideas of Formalist criticism with reference to Russian Formalism. Formalist criticism became prominent in the early part of the 20th century, and is usually defined against the subjectivist theories of literature as propounded by the Romantics. Hence, we must understand that Formalist criticism is not interested in the feelings or the biography of poets. Nor it is concerned with the responses of readers. Instead, it is concerned with artistic structure and form. There are two best-known schools of formalist criticism—Anglo-American New Criticism and Russian Formalism. Like Anglo-American New Criticism, Russian Formalism initially concentrated on poetry. However, the interesting point is that the Russians who developed the so-called *Formal Method* were almost unaware of the developments in England and America. It is only when the prominent Formalist, the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) and his friends began to be translated into English in the late 1950s and 1960s that the English-speaking world started to give importance to their wholly different approach to literary studies. What we shall have learnt in this unit is not the historical comprehensiveness of Russian Formalism but its upholding of a particular *way* of 'reading' literature that would not only influence literary studies in the subsequent periods but would also affect the subsequent developments of literary theory.

2.3 INTRODUCING RUSSIAN FORMALISM

Throughout the later 19th century and early 20th century, sociological considerations were dominant in the critical climate of Russia as the Russian critics dwelt extensively on the connection of literature with issues of social well-being. For instance, Vissarioni Belinsky (1811- 48) maintained that literature should contribute to social betterment while at the same time remaining artistic. Nikolay Dobrolyubov (1836-1861) even maintained that

social and political demands should overshadow the aesthetic in literature. Dimitry Pisarev (1840-68) had denounced Pushkin, as he believed that Pushkin's works are harmful to social progress. Thus, you should note that Pushkin and Gogol were at the centre-stage of critical debate in the mid-19th century. It was however, Pavel Anenkov (1813-1887) who brought out Pushkin's works and tried to defend the autonomy of art and the dualistic ideal of the artistic and the political against the views of the Russian critics. Anenkov's friend Alexander Druzhinin (1824-64) stated that the socially beneficial role of art was only possible when it ceases to be the principal aim of arts. Against such long-standing political and intellectual debates, it is important to discuss the role played by Russian Formalism. Before 'formalism', literary analysis could not be seen as a discipline in itself but part of academic research. The French Symbolist Movement offered a highly subjective and impressionistic mode of criticism. The Formalists, on the other hand, entered the scene with a reaction against the subjectivism of the Symbolists, pleading instead for a scientific mode of literary study.

Initially, the Formalist critics offered a distinctive view of language, and underlined the distinctiveness of literary language against ordinary language. In the subsequent times, the distinction between plot and story was extensively examined. Russian Formalism shared ideas with Anglo-American New Criticism in taking a literary text as an autonomous entity and hence, the proper object of study. The second decade of the 20th century saw the emergence of two circles of literary thinkers and linguists in Russia namely "Moscow Linguistic Circle" based in Moscow, and the OPOJAZ often known as the "Society for the Study of Poetic Language" based in St. Petersburg. The former circle was formed in the capital city of Russia in 1915. It was founded by the eminent linguist and scholar, Roman Jakobson. The other members of the group were Grigory Vinokur, Peter Bogatynev, Osip Brik and Boris Tomashevsky. The second circle OPOJAZ was formed in St. Petersburg in 1916 of which Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Boris Eichenbaum and Viktor Vinogradov were the members. Although the Russian critics were nevertheless associated in their intellectual efforts, their intellectual co-operation gave birth to several volumes of essays,

entitled “Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language” (1916-23). However, the issue on which both the two circles converged was the specificity of literature. Following this, both linguists and literary theorists were compelled to ask: What is literature? What constitutes its uniqueness, or its special mode of being?



LET US KNOW

Russian Formalism vs New Criticism:

There seems to be many things common between Russian Formalism and American New Criticism because of their similar emphasis on ‘close reading’. The Russian Formalists regarded themselves as developers of a science of criticism and were more interested in the discovery of a systematic method for the analysis of poetic texts. They emphasised a differential definition of literature as opposed to the New Critical isolation and objectification of the single text.

Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Technique” (1917) made an example of poetry by stating that poetry clearly exhibits the tendency to make our contact with the written word difficult. Consequently, he characterised poetic language as speech consciously constructed for the purpose of drawing attention to the very fabric of expression. This was a radical view adopted by Shklovsky as it debunked a tradition that associated literary craft with a special kind of thinking. Thus, literature started offering itself as a legitimate object of systematic scholarship. The goal of such scholarship was to study the very devices that distinguish artistic writing from all other modes of discourse. Subsequently, Roman Jakobson summarised their mission by stating that he and his colleagues should devote themselves fully to the study of the device by drawing attention not on literature per se, but on ‘literariness’—that is, the function or quality that make a text artistic.

While poetry, with its highly crafted idiom, was privileged by the formalists in their initial search for the distinctive properties of literature,

they were also well aware of the significance of a formalist analysis of prose texts. For instance, Shklovsky tried to show that the principle of impeded form is applicable to works of fiction as well. He even stated that the principles of plot construction are analogous to those of sound instrumentation in verse—whereas the goal of poetry is to make perceptible its own verbal construction, the purpose of narrative fiction, is to make perceptible its own plot construction, how the story is made. The soul of plot construction, according to Shklovsky, was **staircase construction**: the advancement of the story not by a straight line, but along a roundabout course on which gradation becomes possible through repetition. Thus, he developed the views on narrative fiction based on the opposition of Fabula and Sjuzhet, translated roughly as "story" and "plot". Fabula is the story "told straight". Sjuzhet, on the other hand, is this same story, not as it might have happened in real life, but in its literary presentation: with all the twist and turns.

The formalists were not really interested in exploring at length the peculiarities of past traditions, even less in tracing lines of development from past to present. For them history mattered mostly insofar as it offered them a series unfolded in time, a concatenation of interrelated facts. They focused primarily on the sequences that demonstrated how one literary phenomenon is engendered by another on the principle of opposition. They held the view that that if anyone wanted to find out what is specific to a given literary work, one must examine its formal properties. Therefore, it is not necessary to take into account how large the historical and social factors are in shaping a literary work. Secondly, the formalists resisted the mimetic theory of literature, which propounded literature as the result of imitation of reality.

The end of Formalism came in the years 1929–30 following Stalin's consolidation of power. In his efforts to bring ideological purity, he set out to expose and eliminate ideological deviations in all branches of thought. Viewed previously as the ideological opponents of Marxism, the formalists now became simply ideological enemies, whose destruction was a higher priority than the serious engagement with their arguments. Some, like

Shklovsky, wrote self-critical reflections, acknowledging the defects of their approach. Others, like Tynyanov, retreated from literary criticism. While, others, including Eichenbaum and Tomashevsky, adapted to the demands of the new orthodoxy and continued to work as literary scholars within the Stalinist establishment. Extinguished in the Soviet Union, formalism enjoyed an afterlife of some sorts through the activities of the Prague Linguistic Circle.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: In what way, do you think, Formalism was against subjectivist views of art?

Q 2: What are the similarities and differences between Russian Formalism and New Criticism?

Q 3: Name the two circles of Formalism in Russia.

Q 4: Do you accept that the Formalists contributed towards the study of poetry only?

Q 5: How did the prominent Formalist critics finally react to Stalin's views?

2.4 THE RUSSIAN FORMALIST CRITICS

The following is a discussion of the major Russian critics whose contributions gradually shaped what we now call Russian Formalism.

2.4.1 Roman Jakobson (1896-1982)

Roman Jakonson was one of the most influential linguists, literary theorists, and semioticians of the 20th century. He was born in Russia in 1896. He entered Moscow University in 1914, completed his study at the University of Prague, and later taught at Masaryk University from 1935 until the Nazi occupation in 1939. He was the founder of **Moscow Linguistic Circle** in 1915 and was also associated with the OPOJAZ. He founded the **Prague Linguistic Circle** where he started studying the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de

Saussure's work. In 1939, he fled to Scandinavia, then immigrated to the USA in 1941 and stayed there till his death in 1982. He rendered a considerable impact on the study of linguistics in general. His role in the formation of Russian Formalism and in the post war development of Structuralism, established him as one of the pioneering figures of literary and cultural theory. His advocacy of the idea that the study of language is essential to the study of literature made him one of the most influential figures in the "linguistic turn" in Critical Theory.

Jakobson developed his linguistic approach to literary theory by constructing a scientific basis for distinguishing literature from all other forms of linguistic communication. Together with other formalists like Iury Tynianov and Viktor Shklovsky, he developed the theory of "literariness" of literary writing inviting scrutiny of the phonological, semantic, and metrical "devices" of the work. This linguistic approach to literature represented a radical break with the historical and biographical modes of literary analysis popular at that time. Jakobson viewed that poetics cannot be separated from linguistics. Incorporating the concepts of synchrony and diachrony, he explains that literary study is concerned with elements of the literary text that persist at a given point of time.

However, Jakobson's contribution to the formalist movement lies in the analysis of 'literariness'. He attempted to define what makes a verbal message a work of art in linguistic terms. 'Literariness', about which you will get to read in the following section of this unit, was a major concern for the formalists from the very beginning of the movement. In the essay "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" Jakobson explored this fundamental 'formalist' idea using a wide range of illustration and example. Closely linked to this concept is a theory of poetry. Besides, in this famous essay Jakobson identifies metaphor and metonymy as two fundamental ways of organizing discourse.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Discuss Jakobson's Linguistic approach to Literary Studies.

2.4.2 Yuri Tynyanov (1894-1943)

Born in Latvia, Tynyanov graduated from Petrograd University in 1918. Besides his identity as a 'formalist' critic, Tynyanov was also regarded as an authority on Pushkin. The question of what counts as literature and what does not, was one of his major pre-occupations. He held the view that a text being 'literary' depended on its relationship with both literary and extra-literary orders. Thus, you should note that his concept of a literary system is that a text may be literary and non-literary depending on the nature of the literary systems within which it is set. The initial position of the Formalists was to discuss the aesthetic and historical. Gradually, they pleaded for the study of the devices and techniques, which account for the "literariness" of a given work of art. By 1924, Tynyanov introduced a systematic and functional perspective into literary studies. The most distinguished work of Tynyanov in this regard was *Theses on Language*—a collaborative effect with Jakobson.

The following points he raised in the book are important for the 'formalist' movement.

1. Literary study must be carried on rigorously on a theoretical basis using precise terminology.
2. Within a particular form in literature (such as poetry) structural laws must be established before it is related to other fields.
3. Study of literary history must be systematic and 'evidences' must be analysed attending on how they work within the system.
4. A system is not assemblage of all contemporary phenomena; it involves a hierarchy of which elements can be situated.

2.4.3 Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984)

Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky was a Russian literary theorist and critic, and writer of experimental prose. As you are already informed, he was also one of the initiators of Russian Formalism. Stimulated by his experience of Russian Futurism, he gave Formalism many of its crucial concepts and key words. His theoretical works and analyses of literature and film influenced crucial developments in Prague Linguistic Circle, Morphology, and Structuralism. Shklovsky coined the term "ostranenie" (estrangement), one of the most important "devices" of poetic language and an essential concept for the "scientific method" of formalist textual analysis.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1893, Shklovsky completed his education at the University of St. Petersburg. In 1923, he moved to Germany to settle there permanently. There he published two novels: *A Sentimental Journey* (1923) and *Zoo* (1923). He came back to Russia and started serious engagement with literary criticism. As a result, his two critical works—*On the Theory of Prose* (1925) and *The Technique of the Writer's Craft* (1928) came out. Like other writers of that period in Russia, he too was under pressure from Soviet authorities. He attempted to adopt Socialist Realism— the official doctrine in literary culture in post-revolutionary Russia. Echoes of such an undertaking can be heard in essays such as "Movements to a Scholarly Error" (1930).

Inspired by Russian Futurism and its experimental use of language (by Mayakovsky and others), Shklovsky developed his own original theses on literature. It occurred in 1913, in the St. Petersburg avant-garde artists' nightclub and cabaret, the **Stray Dog**, where he presented a paper on "The place of futurism in the history of language" to a mixed audience of bohemian intellectuals. Shklovsky developed a fundamental methodology for analyzing literary devices, which defined the task of formalist criticism. Along with Boris

Eichenbaum, Yury Tynyanov, Osip Brik, and the linguist Lev Yakubinsky, he became a member of **Society for the Study of Poetic Language** (OPOYAZ) which was known for being the forum for debating and for publishing on formalist subjects.

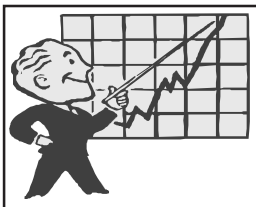
In cooperation with Jakobson's **Moscow Linguistic Circle**, Shklovsky and the OPOYAZ developed a full-fledged formalist theory. His seminal essay "Art as Technique" first published in an OPOYAZ anthology in 1917 can be regarded as the **"manifesto of formalism"**. Here he illustrates how, in contrast to common language, poetic language achieves its "resurrection" through a device what may be called 'ostranenie' (making strange in Russian) or 'defamiliarisation' (in English). 'Ostranenie' in literature has a double effect. You will note that Shklovsky's influence has been wide ranging. Bertolt Brecht, who used the term "Verfremdungseffekt" ("alienation effect") in his theoretical writing on theatre in 1936, probably came across Shklovsky's term 'ostranenie' while visiting Moscow in 1935. In Prague, Jan Mukarovsky developed Shklovsky's formalist thoughts into structuralism, as did Yuri Lotman in Tartu, Estonia, with his structural-semiotic method.

Since, the mid 1960s, as the formalist theorists were being introduced to the West and as interest in Marxism and revolutionary Russia was being renewed, Shklovsky's works began to be translated and widely disseminated among a diverse field of scholars and critics.



LET US KNOW

Viktor Shklovsky's essay "Art as Technique" is crucial to the Formalist movement in Russia because it served as a manifesto of the earlier Formalist schools. The essay offers many radically different views on the nature of art and literature. The concept of 'defamiliarisation' expounded in this essay, gained widespread currency giving the 'Formalist School' the status of a movement.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Mention the significance of Shklovsky's essay "Art as Technique."

Q 8: What are the key concepts and words popularised by Shklovsky?

1.4.4 Boris Tomashevsky (1890-1957)

A graduate from the University of Liege Tomashevsky studied 17th and 18th century French poetry at Sorbonne. He also studied Russian philology at St. Petersburg University and joined 'Opojaz' in 1918. From the mid-1920s, he taught poetics and stylistics at Leningrad University. He played an important role at the OPOJAZ by developing a theory of versification. There he wrote *Russian Versification. Metrics* and many articles like "The problem of verse rhythm", "Verse and Rhythm" and so on. *Russian Versification. Metrics* is a concise introduction to the problem of Russian versification.

Tomashevsky makes the same plot/story distinction that we find in Shklovsky, but considers also the importance of theme and motif in the construction of narrative. His essay "Thematics" examines the difference between plot and story, 'limited' and 'objective' narrators, and relationships between characters and so on. For Tomashevsky, theme summarises and unifies the work and engages the reader's interest, while motifs are elementary and irreducible particles of theme. Importantly, it is the relationship between themes and motifs that gives fiction its narrative form. The distinction between 'free' and 'bound' motifs illustrates the link between plot and theme. Bound motifs are connected in what he calls causal-chronological order, and give a story its coherence. Free motifs, on the other hand, are not necessary to the narrative and may be omitted, but they often contribute to and determine plot structure. Artistry in narrative is the result of the ordering and arrangement of free motifs interspersed among 'bound' motifs.

Thus, what is important about Tomashevsky is that his rigorous conception of theme provides the foundation for his analysis of other aspects of narrative fiction. For example, how theme drives the plot, allows for conflict, creates tension, enables character development, and allows for variation in point of view become important source of debate.

2.4.5 Boris Eichenbaum (1886-1959)

Boris Eichenbaum was another leading figure among the Russian formalist critics. His famous essay "Theory of the Formal Method" (1926) surveys the history and the central theoretical concepts of Russian Formalism. At St. Petersburg University, Eichenbaum initially planned to become a medical doctor but switched his studies to language and literature. He graduated in 1912. His involvement with the formalist movement represents only one phase. Since 1928, his work shifted from the analytical approach of formalism to a series of biographical studies of the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Like all of his colleagues under the Stalinist era, he knew that if he wished to continue writing criticism, he would have to support Socialist Realism. The final volume of his **Tolstoy Project** appeared only posthumously, and the draft of another volume was lost during the German army's siege of Leningrad during World War II.

In "The Theory of the Formal Method" Eichenbaum takes stock of the first decade of work of the formalist movement. He states that many opponents criticised their focus on literary language and formal innovations. Most notably, the Marxist Leon Trotsky, an early leader of the Russian Revolution as well as a powerful writer on history and literature, castigated them for their lack of attention to the social significance of literary works. Besides, those who joined under the mantle of formalism were not a tightly unified school but a heterogeneous movement. Eichenbaum also emphasises Viktor Shklovsky's role as the leader of the formalist movement. Such an

understanding of Eichenbaum's role as Russian Formalist provides valuable insights into our discussion of the history of Formalism.

2.4.6 Vladimir Propp (1895-1970)

Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp was a Russian Formalist scholar who analysed the basic plot components of Russian Folk Tales to identify their simplest irreducible narrative elements. In 1932, Propp became a faculty member at Leningrad University (formerly St. Petersburg University). After 1938, he shifted the focus of his research from linguistics to folklore. He chaired the Department of Folklore until it became part of the Department of Russian Literature. Propp remained a faculty member until his death in 1970.

His *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) is a major contribution to 'formalism' as well as an important step towards the poetics of fictional narrative. Narrative, Propp says, is characterised by its syntactic structuring. He sees narrative not in terms of character but as constituted by 'functions' that the characters have within the plot. Propp identifies certain functions that confer uniformity on the tales. He concludes that a character is attached to a certain function. The functions are distinguishable and they are constant elements independent of their agent. The number of functions Propp distinguishes is thirty-one.

He also concluded that all characters in the 100 tales that he analysed could be resolved into only seven broad character types which are as follows:

The villain — struggles against the hero.

The donor — prepares the hero or gives the hero some magical object.

The (magical) helper — helps the hero in the quest.

The princess and her father — gives the task to the hero, identifies the false hero, marries the hero, often sought for during the narrative. Propp noted that functionally, the princess and the father cannot be clearly distinguished.

The dispatcher — character who makes the lack known and sends the hero off.

The hero or victim/seeker hero — reacts to the donor, weds the princess.

False hero — takes credit for the hero's actions or tries to marry the princess.

[Adapted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Propp]

In a particular fairy tale, one character might be involved in more than one sphere of action. In the same vein, many characters can be involved in a single action. Such an analysis of Propp's ideas regarding Russian folktales may help your understanding of Russian Formalism to a considerable extent. Propp's focus is on elements of the construction of the narrative. The characters or figures in the folktales are seen as 'signifiers' or as coded functions. The various combinations give us the Syuzhet. Such concepts immensely contribute to our understanding of Structuralism.

2.4.7 Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)

Mikhail Mikhaylovich Bakhtin is a Russian theorist. He is increasingly being recognised as one of the major literary theorists of the 20th century. He is famous for his influence on what is known as discourse analysis. He is perhaps best known for his radical philosophy of language, as well as his theory of the novel based on concepts such as "dialogism," "polyphony," and "carnival". Forced into internal exile around 1929, Bakhtin was an obscure figure in his native Russia. However, in the West he was discovered only in the 1960s. Bakhtin's writings were produced during momentous upheavals in Russia like the Revolution of 1917 followed by a Civil War (1918–1921), famine, and the repressive dictatorship under Joseph Stalin. While Bakhtin himself was not a member of the Communist Party, his work has been regarded by some as Marxist in orientation, seeking to provide a corrective to the abstractness of extreme Formalism. Despite his critique of Formalism, he has also

been claimed as a member of the Jakobsonian formalist school, as a Post structuralist, and even as a religious thinker.

Bakhtin's major works as translated into English include *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* (1990), *Rabelais and his World* (1965; trans. 1968), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929; trans. 1973), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1930s; trans. 1981), and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986). Some of his early writings, such as "Art and Responsibility" and "Author and Hero," offer a phenomenological account of the intersubjective connection of human selves in language. Bakhtin's interest in the nature of language was formed in part by members of his Circle. Thus, the authorship of some of the publications of the Bakhtin Circle is still disputable. For example, *Freudianism* (1927) and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929, 1930), were published under the name of V. N. Volosinov. A further title, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), was published under the name of P. N. Medvedev. Linguists like V. V. Ivanov claim that these texts were in fact written by Bakhtin. Bakhtin's major achievements include the formulation of an innovative and radical philosophy of language as well as a comprehensive "theory" of the novel as you will find in his essay "Discourse in the Novel".

Bakhtin pointed out that traditional stylistics had ignored the social dimensions of artistic discourse, which had been treated as a self-subsistent phenomenon, cut off from broader historical movements. Moreover, traditional stylistics have not found a place for the novel, which, like other "prosaic" discourse, has been viewed as an "extra artistic medium," an artistically "neutral" means of communication on the same level as practical speech. He acknowledges that in the 1920s some attempts were made (he appears to be thinking of the Russian Formalists) to recognize "the stylistic uniqueness of artistic prose as distinct from poetry." However, Bakhtin suggests that such endeavours merely revealed that traditional stylistic categories were not applicable to novelistic discourse.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: How is Vladimir Propp connected to Russian Folktales?

Q 10: What are the seven character types that Propp identifies in folktales?

Q 11: How is Bakhtin connected to Formalism?

2.5 MAJOR CONCEPTS

You must have understood by now that the Russian Formalists were pre-occupied with the question of form. Perhaps the most important questions they raised and resolved were—what makes a work of literature 'artistic' and 'literary'? What is the object of literary and critical study? How is the study of artistry of a given work related to language? Let us now discuss some of the key concepts of Russian Formalism in the following subsections.

2.5.1 Literariness

The Formalist critics were preoccupied with the literary quality of a given work. For them, 'literariness' elicits the distinction between literary language and the language of practical discourse. Roman Jakobson held the view that the object of literary study is not literature per se, but 'literariness'—that is to say—the sum of special linguistic and formal properties that distinguish literary texts from non literary texts. For example, as 'poetic' language focuses on the 'message' for its own sake, a verbal message, on the other hand, calls attention to itself. Thus, the relation between 'sign' and its 'referent' is disturbed. You must however understand that 'poetic' function does not necessarily refer to poetry only. Instead, it points to any verbal message that foregrounds the signs more than making them a vehicle for meaning. It also suggests a basic organizing principle underlying all verbal discourse. Jakobson says, "Poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into that of combination."

In poetry, a particular word is selected from among a stock of equivalent words. The chosen words are then combined not according to the grammatical rule of combination, but according to the same principle of equivalence. Along the axis of combination, this equivalence is created through various means such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, parallelism, or other rhetorical devices. These two ways of organizing verbal discourse are likened to 'metaphor' and 'metonymy'. Jakobson not merely expounds the metaphoric and metonymic principles, but tries to understand different 'genres' and types of literary work in these terms. Poetry exhibits the principle of metaphor whereas metonymic principle is the very heart of prose literature. Thus, we can see that the issue of 'literariness' marginalises the content element of a given work of art.

2.5.2 Form and Content

The Formalists were manifestly oriented towards the idea of 'form'. Cursorily speaking, 'form' includes all formal aspects, compositional elements, constitutive principles, as well as the rhetorical devices that go into the making of a literary text. You perhaps remember that the neo-classical critics defined 'form' as a combination of component elements that could be used to maintain decorum, that the Romantic poet Coleridge too upheld that 'organic form' in the creative process is just like a growing plant, where the parts are inseparably related to the whole. Even the New Critics used the term 'structure' synonymously with 'form'. Thus, what prevailed throughout the different phases of critical tradition is the dichotomy between 'form' and 'content'. It is important to note that the formalists resist the idea that 'form' is a container or an envelope. Instead, they define 'form' as something concrete, dynamic and self-contained. Form determines structure and meaning. Even 'form' is itself understood as 'content'. From early on, the Russian Formalist critics distanced themselves from the traditional distinction between 'form' and 'content'. Although in early formalist writings explicit

definitions of 'form' and 'content' are limited, gradually, formalist discourse moved into a theoretical field and reached a common understanding that combined 'form' with the concept of 'material' and not with 'content'.

According to Formalism, it is the 'form' that remains to be studied as the proper object of literary study. However, you should note that they often avoided providing any definitive meaning of the term, preferring terminology less burdened with prior significations and thus less susceptible to ambiguity. Thus, the formalist notion of 'form' developed not so much as the result of explicit definitions, but as the corollary of concrete attempts to grasp and analyze the elusive artistic nature of texts. This, more than anything else, was the pursuit that shaped and distinguished the Formalist movement. The Russian Formalist Boris Eichenbaum noted that the question of Form eventually became synonymous with the question of literature.

2.5.3 Fabula and Syuzhet

The conceptually related terms fabula and sjuzhet, rendered into English approximately as "story" and "plot," were elaborated by the Russian formalists within their overall theory of narrative prose. In formalist usage, the two terms acquire significance markedly different from that of their English equivalents, as well as from their traditional meaning in Russian. Thus Sjuzhet is best understood as plot construction (or emplotment), viewed formally, while Fabula is grasped as the sequence of events that make up a story (or storyline), but viewed outside the artistic process of narration. The distinction between the two allowed the formalist theoreticians to make significant headway in their study of narrative fiction.

In similar manner, we can also refer to Shklovsky's distinction between story and plot. The story is the basic succession of events that the artist is disposed to. Plot, on the other hand, is the distinctive way in which the story is organised so as to 'defermiliarise' the familiar materials. Plot, therefore, has to do with the 'form' of a novel.

As Syuzhet (or plot) works upon the Fabula (or story), and 'defamiliarises' familiar material, one Fabula can give rise to a number of Syuzhets. It is interesting to find that such a formulation is also akin to structuralism. This story/plot dichotomy was carried forward by structuralists and subsumed in their theories of narrative. Vladimir Propp is an important link between these two movements. Vladimir Propp was greatly inspired by the distinction between Fabula and Syuzhet, and his *Morphology of the Folktale* is evident manifestation of formalist influence. Here, Propp studies many Russian folktales and fairy tales and reveals that underlying all of them, there is only one story. The individual tales (Syuzhet) are variations upon a basic Fabula.



LET US KNOW

As stated in the previous section, one important area of exploration in Russian Formalism was the language of prose fiction. This brings us back to the concepts of Fabula and Syuzhet explicated by Boris Tomashevsky. *The Dictionary of Narratology* however, defines Fabula as 'the set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence'. Syuzhet, on the other hand, implies a logical ordering of events and situations. Fabula is a straightforward account of events and situations an ordering of which has nothing to do with the artistic effect to arouse suspense. Syuzhet, on the other hand, is the artistic re-arrangement of the representational elements.

Influential Western theories have relied more on analogous dichotomies to analyze the structure of fictional texts: "histoire" vs "recit" (Gerard Genette), "story" vs "discourse" (Seymour Chatman), "fabula" vs "story" (Mieke Bal) and so on. The isolation of these two aspects has enabled, on the one hand, the exploration of the narrative structures that underlie the endlessly varied stories we tell; on the other hand, it has furthered inquiry into the different modalities of narrative presentation (order, point view, voice, mood, and so on).

2.5.4 Defamiliarisation

The term was first introduced in 1917, by Shklovsky in the article "Art as Technique" published in the journal of **Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language**. Defamiliarisation, which quickly became a key concept for Formalist literary criticism, works by making everyday objects unfamiliar and thus recovering for the audience "the sensations of life". Shklovsky, beautifully identifies defamiliarisation as the artistic technique "to make the stone stony". You should note that Shklovsky introduced the term in opposition to Russian symbolist theories of art, which abandoned the familiar rather than try to awaken its audience to fresh perspectives on the world of the mundane. Defamiliarisation, in Shklovsky's use, thus becomes a theory about artistic perception. Art defamiliarises images, ideas or situations which are otherwise familiar to us and thus impedes our perception. Art and literature assume significance only against the backdrop of ordinary habitual perception. It is important to note that the Formalists were much occupied with the formal aspects of literature or the literary devices that make a work 'literary'. As Tony Bennett puts it in *Formalism and Marxism*: "the formalists sought to reveal the devices through which the total structure of given works of literature might be said to defamiliarise, make strange or challenge certain dominant conceptions ideologies even, although they did not use the word of the social world."

Shklovsky opposes his notion of defamiliarisation to an "economic" theory of language according to which statements should express the most information in the fewest words and to an artistic method according to which art clarifies "the unknown by means of the known". Accordingly, defamiliarisation may be understood as part of the debate over the role of art in Western society since Romanticism – whether art simply provides an accurate representation of reality or plays a more transformative role in the shaping and understanding of that reality. Shklovsky's

concept of defamiliarisation in his essay "Art as Technique" thus provided Formalism with one of its key concepts for defining and appreciating a literary work.



LET US KNOW

Shklovsky's ideas rendered strong influences on a wide diversity of thinkers and artists. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht developed the concept of 'Verfremdungseffekt' – translated as "alienation effect" – in his "epic" or "dialectical" theatre, owes a great deal to Shklovsky's ideas of defamiliarisation. Brecht employed 'verfremdungseffekt' to reflect his belief that a play should never encourage its audience to think of themselves as passive spectators of a realistically presented scene but should draw attention to its framing, its constructedness, in order to incite audience members actively to make judgments about the events and characters depicted in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: What is understood by the term Literariness?

Q 13: Which are the fundamental ways through which an artist may 'defamiliarise'?

Q 14: Discuss the relation between Fabula and Syuzhet.

2.6 RECEPTION OF RUSSIAN FORMALISM

From this unit, you have learnt that Formalism has been one of the important methods for analysing art in the early 20th century Russia, Europe, and North America. Its influence on the humanities, particularly the study of literature can never be denied. You must have understood by now that Russian Formalism was not a uniform movement. It comprised diverse theoreticians whose views were shaped through methodological debates on the distinction between poetic and practical language. The diverging and converging forces of Russian Formalism gave rise to the **Prague**

School of Structuralism in the mid-1920s and provided a model for the literary wing of **French Structuralism** in the 1960s and 1970s.

After Post structuralism, the basic Formalist assumption that there is something distinctive about literary language and that it differs substantially from ordinary uses of language, has been contested. The possibility of multiple meanings is not a specific property of literary language but a common trait in any language. Again, such diverse trends as post-colonialism, Feminism, Neo-historicism are all, in indifferent ways, reactions against the Formalists exclusive focus on the insularity of the literary text. What then is of lasting influence in Formalism one may ask. Most importantly, it is their linking of literary study with linguistic investigation. In subsequent critical trends, the question of language has become an issue of paramount importance, although different critical school study different aspects and questions such as gender, power, subjectivity, and so on. These are all conducted through an acute investigation of language. The Formalist, however, remained a neutral designation to a group of thinkers in later times. Leading post-revolutionary Russian thinkers such as Anatoly Lunacharsky, Nikolai Bukharin, and Leon Trotsky repudiated the Formalist project for its adherence to the formal aspects of literary texts at the cost of its wider historical and social dimensions. In fact, the Formalists hardly reconciled formalist and stylistic analysis with wider socio-historical issues until the arrival of Mikhail Bakhtin into the critical arena.



2.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Formalism, as developed in Russia, is a theory about language and a methodology for reading literary texts. There are many things common between Russian Formalism and Anglo American New Criticism. Although developed independently and there is no such direct historical relationship between the two, there are several similarities. For example, both movements expressed an interest in considering literature on its own terms, instead of focusing on its relationship to political, cultural or historical externalities. Both focused on the literary devices and the craft of the author. In this unit, we have read about the

major exponents of the Formalist Movement who tried to define and explore the sphere of literary phenomena as an autonomous domain with laws and regularities peculiar to it alone. They made popular theoretical concepts like Literariness, Defamiliarisation, Form vs Content, Fabula and Syuzhet and so on. Although short lived, Russian Formalism gave rise to the **Prague School of Structuralism** in the mid 1920s, and also provided a model for the literary wing of **French Structuralism** in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the Formalists were also criticised for their exclusive focus on the text at the cost of the larger socio-historical issues involved with the production of a text.



2.8 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Propp

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Before 'formalism', literary analysis could not be seen as a discipline in itself… …but the French Symbolist Movement offered a highly subjective and impressionistic mode of criticism… …the Formalists, reacted against the subjectivism of the Symbolists, pleading instead for a scientific mode of literary study.

Ans to Q 2: Both trends took a literary text as an autonomous entity and hence, the proper object of study… …both emphasised 'close reading'… … the Russian Formalists regarded themselves as developers of a science of criticism and emphasised a differential definition of literature as opposed to the New Critical isolation and objectification of the single text.

Ans to Q 3: "Moscow Linguistic Circle" based in Moscow, and the OPOJAZ or the "Society for the Study of Poetic Language" based in St. Petersburg… …the former was founded by Roman Jakobson, Grigory Vinokur, Peter Bogatynev, Osip Brik and Boris Tomashevsky… …the second circle OPOJAZ was founded by Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Boris Eichenbaum and Viktor Vinogradov.

Ans to Q 4: No… …they also made a major contribution to the theory of prose with the help of the concept of Skaz… …Skaz stands for a style of literary narration that strives to approximate the characteristics of oral delivery… …as a type of narration Skaz points to its own production: the intonation, linguistic patterns, and verbal peculiarities of the fictional storyteller.

Ans to Q 5: The end of Formalism came with Stalin's consolidation of power… …the formalists became Stalin's ideological enemies… …Shklovsky, started writing self-critical reflections, acknowledging the defects of their approach… …Tynyanov, retreated from literary criticism…. …Eichenbaum and Tomashevsky, adapted to the demands of the new orthodoxy within the Stalinist establishment.

Ans to Q 6: Jakobson developed his linguistic approach to literary theory by constructing a scientific basis for distinguishing literature from all

other forms of linguistic communication… …he developed the theory of "literariness" of literary writing inviting close scrutiny of the phonological, semantic, and metrical "devices" of the work… …this linguistic approach to literature represented a radical break with the historical and biographical modes of literary analysis.

Ans to Q 7: "Art as Technique" is crucial to the Formalist movement in Russia… …the essay offers many radically different views on the nature of art and literature… … it made an important 'statement' of the early Formalist method by announcing a break with the early 'aesthetic approach' and by providing a methodology of criticism and the purpose of art.

Ans to Q 8: Shklovsky gave Formalism many of its crucial concepts and key words… …the concept of 'ostranenie' (making strange in Russian) or 'defamiliarisation' (in English) is the most important.

Ans to Q 9: Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) is a major contribution to 'formalism' as well as an important step towards the poetics of fictional narrative… …he sees narrative not in terms of characters but as constituted by 'functions' that the characters have within the plot… …he concludes that a character is attached to a certain function and the total number of functions Propp distinguishes are thirty one.

Ans to Q 10: The villain… …The donor… …The (magical) helper… …The princess and her father… …The dispatcher… …The hero or victim/ seeker hero… …False hero.

Ans to Q 11: Mikhail Bakhtin is known for his discussion of the Novelistic discourse… …he is famous for his influence on what is known as discourse analysis…. …He was not directly related to formalism but provided a corrective to the abstractness of extreme Formalism…. …Thus, despite his critique of Formalism, he is claimed as a member of the Jakobsonian formalist school.

Ans to Q 12: The term was coined by Roman Jakobson… … **'**literariness' elicits the distinction between literary language and the language of practical discourse… …the object of literary study is not literature per se, but 'literariness'—that is the sum of special linguistic and formal properties that distinguish literary texts from non literary texts.

Ans to Q 13: The three fundamental ways to defamiliarise are: by distorting syntax and heightening diction to make the subjects more extraordinary or unsettling… …by avoiding common expressions and names of familiar objects or activities in favour of phrases and descriptions that highlight the strange… …by using "parallelism," for importation into one genre of the terms, methodology, or content typical of another.

Ans to Q 14: Fabula and Sjuzhet, rendered into English approximately as story and plot… …Sjuzhet is best understood as plot construction (or emplotment)… …Fabula is grasped as the sequence of events that make up a story (or storyline), but viewed outside the artistic process of narration.



2.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Give a brief idea of the concerns of the Russian Formalist Critics with regard to ideas of language and literary text.

Q 2: Describe the works of the Russian Formalists with special reference to their ideas of 'form' and 'content'. Explain, in what ways, they were different from the Anglo- American New Critics.

Q 3: Highlight the contributions of the Russian Formalists to literary studies with reference to the role of art, and the relation of art to social reality.

Q 4: Discuss the growth and development of Formalism with reference to Moscow Linguistic Circle and OPOJAZ. Do you think that Formalism came to an end following Stalin's consolidation of power?

Q 5: What are the different concepts popularised by the Russian Formalist critics? Discuss.

Q 6: In what ways, did Russian Formalism influence the later developments in Literary and Critical Theory?

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UNIT 3: STRUCTURALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Introducing Structuralism

3.4 Major Thinkers of Structuralism

- 3.4.1 Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)
- 3.4.2 Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009)
- 3.4.3 Roland Barthes (1915-1980)
- 3.4.4 Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)
- 3.4.5 Gerard Genette (1930-)
- 3.4.6 Jonathan Culler (1944-)
- 3.4.7 Northrop Fry (1912-1991)

3.5 Important Concepts

- 3.5.1 Structure
- 3.5.2 Text
- 3.5.3 Binary Opposition
- 3.5.4 Sign, Signifier and Signified

3.6 Reception of Structuralism

3.7 Let us Sum up

3.8 Further Reading

3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.10 Possible Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define the term 'structure'
- trace the unique historical and intellectual background out of which Structuralism emerged
- make a list of the Structuralist critics
- find out the differences between Structuralism and Poststructuralism as approaches to Literary Studies

- make an assessment of the notion of Structuralism as an influential theoretical trend.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the 3rd unit of the course on Literary Theory. In this unit, we shall discuss Structuralism which is a theoretical concept that refers first to a broad intellectual movement signifying various ways of theorizing in the 'human sciences' of the twentieth century; and then, to a particular set of approaches to literature and other cultural art forms which flourished in France during 1960s. Taking its ideas from linguistics, and in its analyses of culture and its institutions from structuralist anthropology, it focuses on the conditions that make meaning possible, rather than on meaning itself. It tries to map the structures that are the actual carriers of meaning and the various relations between the elements within those structures. Structuralism bases its premises on the 'constructed' nature of all human activity and its products. We should note that a structure is the principle of construction and the object of analysis understood in terms of any 'system'. Any element in a structure derives its meaning on the basis of its selection from a 'system' of options and is consequently defined against other possibilities. Such an understanding of 'meaning' radically establishes the point that it is derived not from nature or God, but from an arbitrary man-made system of cognition.

3.3 INTRODUCING STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism can be said to have formally begun with the *Course in General Linguistics,* a series of lectures delivered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) at the University of Geneva. Although published posthumously in 1960, this book provided a new definition of the 'object of linguistics'. It has been unanimously accepted that the models for structuralist ideas can be traced in Ferdinand de Saussure's pioneering linguistics, which centers not on individual utterances but on the underlying rules and conventions that enable language to operate. Saussurean structuralism analyses the social or collective dimensions of language,

focusing on grammar rather than usage; rules rather than actual expressions; and *langue* (the system of language) rather than *parole* (actual speech). This linguistics is concerned with the infrastructure of language common to all speakers at a given time (which operates on an unconscious level), and not with surface phenomena or historical charge. Thus, it attends to the synchronic (that which exists now) not the diachronic (that which exists and changes over time). Saussure wanted to show that **'language has its own potentials' and can exist 'outside the individual'**. For him, Language is a self authenticating system and is not determined by the physical world. Whatever one sees in language is simply the connection of a meaning to a particular sound-image. This is what helped Saussure to define the scope of **Semiology**.

But any attempt to understand the intellectual background of Structuralism is never complete without a reference to Anglo American New Criticism and Russian Formalism—two of the most significant theoretical trends which provided grounds for the future development of Structuralism. In the previous unit, you have read in some detail about Russian Formalism, which should help you to understand Structuralism in a more convenient way in this unit. The New Critics of around 1930s focused on the meaning of a literary text. Both the New Criticism of the United States and Practical Criticism of United Kingdom opted for providing 'interpretations'. The New Critics paid a particular attention to the formal aspects of literature, which they believed, contributed largely to its meaning and their attempt at 'close reading' made their effort easier. You should be reminded of I. A. Richard's book *Practical Criticism* where he claimed: **"All respectable poetry invites close reading."** Gradually, this motto became important for every new critic, as they could finally understand the point that with the help of irony, paradox, ambiguity, and complexity each word of a poem could be scrutinized in detail with regard to all its denotations and connotations.

Simultaneously with the New Critics, during the first half of the twentieth century, the literary theorists of Russia and Czechoslovakia developed a theory of **'literariness'**. They argued that it was 'literariness' that differentiated literary texts from other forms of writings like an

advertisement, or a newspaper article. Dealing with this they focused on the formal aspect of literature and the sort of language it employed. The Russian Formalists suggested that what makes the language of literature different from non-literary language is the employment of a range of devices that produce a defamiliarising effect. Later, they turned towards the more specific functions of those devices. Borrowing much from the Russian Formalists, the Prague Structuralists began to see a literary text as a structure of differences. Finally, they propounded that a literary text differs from other texts because of its orientation towards itself, its own form and not towards any outside sources.

What do the Structuralists usually do? They may help in examining the underlying structure of a specific genre such as the detective novel. They may try to reduce the enormous diversity of characters whom we meet in stories and in novels to a limited number of roles that always occur in fixed relations to each other. They may study the narrative aspects of texts (and of film, historical writing, commercials, and other cultural products that make use of narration) in order to systematize the narratological possibilities and the narrative strategies – that are available to a writer.

However, the most pertinent issue underlying such an intercontinental background of Structuralism, is a new awareness of the ways of receiving literary works. Structuralism challenges some of the most beliefs of the common readers. Going against the assumption that the text is a place where we can form a communion with the author's thoughts and feelings, Structuralism finally asserts that the author is 'dead'. Pioneering concepts and methods of Structural linguistics and Anthropology have strongly influenced how modern theory and criticism understand cultural phenomena. Out of Structuralist methodology has emerged the discipline of Semiotics or Semiology, a field that studies sign systems, codes, and conventions of all kinds, ranging from human to animal languages, the language of fashion and food, the codes of diagnostic medicine to those of written literature.



LET US KNOW

What Structuralist Critics Do? [*Adapted from Peter Barry*]

1. They analyse (mainly) prose narratives, relating the text to some larger containing structure, such as: (a) the conventions of a particular literary genre, or
   (b) a network of intertextual connections, or
   (c) a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, or
   (d) a notion of narrative as a complex of recurrent patterns or motifs.
2. They interpret literature in terms of a range of underlying parallels with the structures of language, as described by modern linguistics. For instance, the notion of the 'mytheme', posited by Levi-Strauss, denoting the minimal units of narrative 'sense', is formed on the analogy of the morpheme, which, in linguistics, is the smallest unit of grammatical sense. An example of a morpheme is the 'ed' added to a verb to denote the past tense.
3. They apply the concept of systematic patterning and structuring to the whole field of Western culture, and across cultures, treating as 'systems of signs' anything from Ancient Greek myths to brands of soap powder.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What, according to you, is a structure?

Q 2: Who introduced Structuralism as an important theoretical approach?

Q 3: Relate Structuralism with New Criticism and Russian Formalism.

3.4 MAJOR THINKERS OF STRUCTURALISM

The practice of Structuralism is usually related to thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis

Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Gerard Genette, Jonathan Culler and so on. Let us, in this section, try to examine very briefly the contributions of some of the important thinkers who should be acclaimed for their innovative thinking which finally established Structuralism as a significant approach in literary studies.

3.4.1 Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

Since it is not possible to discuss the contributions of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in detail in this section, I will refer only to the key points regarding his contributions to Structuralism. Ferdinand de Saussure is well known for his book *The Course in General Linguistics.* You should note that this book is based on student notes, and was compiled by his colleagues in 1916 after Saussure's death. Saussure who soon came to be known as "the father of modern linguistics" influenced mid-twentieth century thought in a wide variety of fields. In the late eighteenth century, the European study of languages had been revolulionized by the encounter with Sanskrit (brought about by the British colonization of India). Comparison among Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin suggested a common ancestor of all three, which scholars dubbed Proto-Indo-European. The generation of Saussure's teachers, popularly known as the Neogrammarians, had begun to explore the rules of affinity and transformation in a more truly historical way. Saussure, however, was going to change it. After spending a year studying in Berlin and receiving his doctorate from the University of Leipzig in 1880, he became a senior lecturer at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes (School for Advanced Study) in Paris, where he began by teaching Gothic and Old High German, later adding Sanskrit (which he had studied since 1874), Latin, Persian, and Lithuanian. In 1891, he accepted a professorship at the University of Geneva, teaching there for the rest of his life. It was in 1906 that, after the death of a colleague, he was asked to add "general linguistics" to his teachings in historical and comparative linguistics.

What was Saussure's new theory of language? Saussure was almost convinced about the **"arbitrary"** (purely conventional) nature of the sign. Since there are thousands of human languages, the relation between words and things cannot be based on natural resemblances. Saussure's own theory illustrates this point through his terms *langage, langue,* and *parole* which have never been satisfactorily translated into English. *Le langage* (in English, "language") is a general human faculty, that which enables us to speak of "body language" or "the language of fashion." Language, for Saussure, is a structured system of conventional signs, studied in their internal complexity as if frozen in time (synchronically) rather than as changing over time (diachronically). Saussure further explained the study of language in terms of 'sign', 'signifier' and 'signified', which are explained in the next section.



LET US KNOW

La langue, which in English is also called "language," is the name for specific languages *(la langue anglaise,* the English language); but it is also the most general term for language itself, the term Saussure uses to name the object of linguistics. La *langue* in this sense does not exist: it is a theoretical object abstracted from the structures of specific languages. *La parole* (speech) is what Saussure calls "the executive side": the concrete 'utterances' that constitute all acts of language. These individual utterances are excluded from his theory of language insofar as they only "execute" possibilities that exist in language already, or depart from it for creative purposes without fundamentally changing it.

Saussure then goes on to say that *everything* in language is **relational** as he states "in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are

only differences *without positive terms"* (Saussure's emphasis). In other words, neither ideas nor sounds exist prior to their combination. This description of a difference that does not depend on the prior existence of knowable entities is one of Saussure's most radical declarations. Saussure used an interesting example to explain what he meant by saying that there are no intrinsic fixed meanings in language—that of the 8.25 Geneva to Paris express train, as he states: "What is it that gives this train its identity? It isn't anything material, since each day it will have a different engine and carriages, different drivers and passengers, and so on. If it is late, it won't even leave at 8.25. Does it even have to be a train? I once asked at Southampton station for the Brighton train, and the ticket collector pointed to a bus standing outside the station and said, 'That's it'. It was a Sunday, and because of engineering works on the line, a bus service was being used to ferry passengers beyond the sections being worked upon. Sometimes, then, a 'train' *doesn't* have to be a train." Saussure's conclusion is that the only thing, which gives this train its identity, is its position in a structure of differences: it comes *between* the 7.25 and the 9.25, that is, its identity is purely relational.

In Saussure's conception of language, the 'sign' is not only **arbitrary** but also linear (he thus uses a spatial term for what is in fact temporal, the succession of signs as they unfold in time during speech). Signs are combined like links in a chain to form the line of language according to two relations: the *syntagmatic* (all units present in their articulation) and the *associative* (all related units present in the mind but absent from the actual sequence). This distinction, later called *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic,* would form an important part of Roman Jakobson's theory of metaphor and metonymy. For Saussure, some syntagmatic relations beyond mere grammatical rules count as *language* rather than *speech.* Far from being freely chosen by each speaker, they constitute the "idioms" that a newcomer must master in order to "know" a language. Saussure believed that the proper object of linguistic study is the

system, which underlies all signifying practices, and not the individual utterances. In his views, words are not merely symbols which correspond to their referents, but 'signs' which are made up of two ingredients—'signifiers' and 'signified' whose relationship is always arbitrary. The elements of language derive meaning not because of the connection between the word and the thing but because of a system of relations. This means that there is no one to one relationship between the word and the object it signifies.



LET US KNOW

The contribution of Saussure is invaluable for us as his concepts like—arbitrariness of language, langue and Parole, diachrony and synchrony, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationship etc. revolutionized contemporary studies on linguistics. However, a clear understanding of such concepts will further enhance your capacity to understand what he was actually trying to say. Attempting to answer the question: What is the object of linguistic investigation? Saussure made a fundamental distinction between Langue and Parole. Gradually, this distinction became a model for all Structuralist theories.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What are the contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure to the study of language?

3.4.2 Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009)

The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss rose to prominence in between 1950s and 1960s. Taking inspiration from Ferdinand de Saussure who had defined language as a system of signs and linguistics as a branch of Semiology), Levi-Strauss argued that the objects of Social Anthropology (cultural phenomena such as kinship systems and rituals) consist of communications, not just

functions. Reframing Anthropology as a study of Culture rather than cultures, Levi-Strauss underscored the discipline's implications for history, politics, art, literature, economics, and philosophy, dramatically transforming anthropology's profile in the academy. Within the discipline many scholars have contested the empirical validity of his analyses of kinship, totemism, and myth and have accused Levi-Strauss of engaging in a kind of metaphysical colonisation. Though the structuralist method that Levi-Strauss pioneered has been superseded, the analogy he proposed-that cultural phenomena constitute exchanges of messages and that cultural codes may be analysed as languages-remains a tacit working assumption of many forms of cultural theory.

Levi-Strauss is interested in the question of how our ancestors, in their evolutionary process, started to make sense of the world they found themselves in. The very basic mental operation began to develop based on opposites—some things are edible, some are not, some animals are dangerous, some are not. What is significant here is the fact that classification in terms of such oppositions in which the opposites are related to each other as the presence or absence of the one will influence the other, seemed to him to be quite natural. Our ancestors deployed this structural model to comprehend the idea of the world. Hence, for Levi-Strauss, the structure of primitive thinking is binary. Later, having the structure of language, they might have started to categorise their world in a basic pattern of presences and absences like –light/darkness, man- made/ natural, raw/ cooked, clothes/ necked and so on.

In New York Levi-Strauss met the Russian Roman Jakobson and attended his lectures on linguistics. This encounter affected him as a "revelation": "Jakobson revealed to me the existence of a body of doctrine that had already been formed within a discipline, linguistics, with which I was unacquainted."

Jakobson was elaborating Saussurean linguistics that language does not consist of positive terms with meaning in and of

themselves, but instead is a system of relations in which each term is defined by its difference from other terms. Suggesting, "the kinship system is a language," Levi-Strauss proposed adapting the methods of structural linguistics to the analysis of kinship and other cultural phenomena. His *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was published in 1949. In his view, the prohibition of incest, which seems to be a universal rule in human society, is designed not to ward off biological or psychological damage but to make women available for "trade" by men of their group with men of other groups.

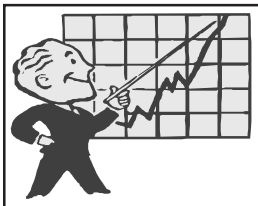


LET US KNOW

It is important to compare the structural analysis of myth by Levi-Strauss to the 'morphological' study of folktales by the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp. Both kinds of analysis influenced structuralism. Propp studied a large number of Russian folktales and found that, despite their differences, they all made use of a small number of functions (hero, helper, villain, test, prohibition, etc.) arranged in a predictable order. Narrative order was a function of unfolding linear time: the narrative had a beginning: a middle, and an end. For Levi-Strauss, in contrast, the linear (or diachronic) ordering of a myth is less important than the systematic (or synchronic) pattern of repetitions, which can exist in different versions or different arrangements without disturbing the mythic system.

Levi-Strauss deviated from this tradition in two different ways- firstly by adopting the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp's ideas on myths; he tried to show how the most diverse myths of a culture, having no connection with each other, could also be read as variation upon one and the same basic pattern. He calls the units of myth as mythemes (just like we have phonemes, and morphemes). Making an analogy with Saussure, Levi-Strauss tried to show how the countless discrete elements that make up a culture could constitute

a 'sign system'. Food habits, taboos, hunting rites, kinship relations- everything that has a cultural origin can be counted as a 'sign'. Such cultural elements are not meaningful in themselves, but draw their meanings from a system of signs in which they functions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is Strauss' view on what he called 'the classification on the basis of opposition'?

Q 6: How is Levi-Strauss associated with Structuralism?

3.4.2 Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

Critics generally differ in their opinion regarding where to situate the French literary critic Roland Barthes in the context of Literary Theory. Barthes introduced Saussurean ideas of Linguistics to the study of literature, and towards his later years, he became particularly concerned with the personal, subjective response of a reader to a text. Inspired by the methods of Structural Linguistics, during 1960s, Barthes wanted to explore the possibility of developing a science of culture. It was also the time when he came closer to the contemporary thinkers like Claude Levi-Strauss and Michel Foucault. His books *Elements of Semiology* and *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* clearly verify his stand on Structuralism. The systems of classification and 'binary opposition' encouraged him a lot. The principle that human performances presuppose a pre-conceived system of differential relations is applied by Barthes to almost all social practices. He refers to and interprets them as sign systems, which operate on a model of language. For him, speech always presupposes a system. Generally considered one of the leading figures in French Structuralism, Roland Barthes is, as Jonathan Culler puts it, "famous for contradictory reasons." On the one hand, Barthes sought a universal grammar of narrative in his influential essay "Introduction to the

Structural Study of Narrative" (1966), or explored Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of Semiology in works like *Elements of Semiology* (1965) and *The Fashion System* (1967); on the other hand, there is the Barthes who wrote playfully and allusively about pleasure in The *Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and in *A Lover's Discourse* (1977).



LET US KNOW

All of Barthes's writings reflect his idiosyncratic creativity. His first book *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) analyses the history of literary styles in terms derived from Karl Marx and Jean Paul Sartre. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes conducts a semiological study of mass culture and everyday life. His object is to show how mass culture is saturated with ideological propositions (or "myths") presented as if they were natural and self-evident. This was to anticipate what is today called **Cultural Studies**.

The publication of S/Z marks a turning point in Barthes's relation to Structuralism. It is a multilevel analysis that refuses to structure the text otherwise than by cutting it into hundreds of little pieces of varying lengths (called *lexias)* and also by identifying five broad functions (called *codes)* at work in the text. However, both Structuralist and Poststructuralist thinkers would contrast their analyses to the classical study of literary and other cultural objects ("work"). The *text* is a process; while the *work* is a product. *Works* can be found on library shelves; while *texts* are signifying fields into which one enters. The point is not that literature can be divided into 'works' and 'texts', but that the reader can activate either the closure of the 'signified' (the coherence of a meaning) or the 'play' of the 'signifier' (the dissemination and disruption of meanings).

Barthes is famous for the essay **"The Death of the Author"** which begins with an example taken from Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*— the tale of a sculptor who falls in love with an Italian

diva subsequently revealed to be not a woman. Barthes argues that the effective, productive, and engaged reading of a text depends on the **suspension of preconceived ideas** about the character of the particular author-or even about human psychology in general. From the moment that writing detaches itself from an immediate context, "It is language which speaks, not the author." The author, the text, and the reader are each composed of a universe of quotations without origin or end. In its celebration of the birth of the reader, **"The Death of the Author"** explores the consequences of freeing the reading process from the constraints of fidelity to an origin, a unified meaning, an identity, or any other pre-given exterior or interior reality. Such ideas help in understanding some of the important aspects of Structuralism.

[Read the essay "The Death of the Author" from Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, edited by David Lodge and Nigel Wood]

3.4.4 Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)

Lacan, although better known as a Poststructuralist, began his theory of psychoanalysis, on the linguistic models of Saussure and Roman Jacobson as well as the on the psychoanalytic methods of Sigmund Freud. The point he made is that **language is a manifestation of structures in the unconscious** and that linguistic patterns reveal important characteristics of the individual subject's psychic state. However, he deviates from Saussure in a specific way. Where Saussure regards the relationship between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' as being almost fixed, Lacan argues that the 'signifier' can shift in meaning and that the 'signified' is always provisional. (Read more about Lacan in the next unit)

3.4.5 Gerard Genette (1930-)

Gerard Genette, another French theoretician and Structuralist critic, is known for his Literary Structuralism later established as Narratology. The focus of Genette was not on the underlying structures of the content of stories, but on the structure of narration

itself-the way stories are told. In fact, the underlying structures that make stories possible is what distinguishes Genette's Structuralist approach. His book *Narrative Discourse* (1972) is one of the most significant contributions to Narratology whose ultimate goal is to discover general rules of narration that will cover almost all the possible ways in which stories are told to produce the intended meaning. Working on his Structuralist approach to narratives, Genette introduced a number of new terminologies redefining already-existing categories and insights. His main contribution can be discussed in terms of his interests and concerns.

The first concern of Genette was with the way the chronological **'order'** of events and actions of a novel is narrated in the actual story. We can express this relationship between the chronological order (formalist's ides of the 'Fabula') and the narrative order (the 'Syuzhet') in terms of their connection at a given point of time. The narration may lag behind the chronological order of events, it may be running with the events, or it may run ahead of them. Genette provided a detailed analysis of all the possible relations between the order of events and the order of narration with the help of certain technical terms namely—analepsis, prolepsis, achrony, proleptic analepsis, analeptuic prolepsus.

The second concern of Genette relates to the notion of **'duration', which** meant the relationship between the actual time in which an event occurs in the reality of the 'world out there' and the time that the narrator takes to narrate that event. Hence, narration should speed-up the happenings so that there is no disastrous consequence like watching a daylong movie in the cinema hall.

Genette's **third concern** is with the notion of **'frequency'**, which actually covers the relation between the number of times that an event occurs in the world and the number of times that it is actually narrated. 'Frequency' is in use when we try to describe repeatedly occurring events only once as if we might say we went to the beach every single day during the last summer.

Such discussions on narrative were very significant contributions to Structuralist Narratology.

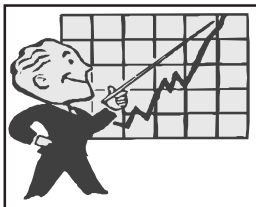
3.4.6 Jonathan Culler (1944-)

Making an attempt to assimilate French Structuralism to an Anglo American critical perspective, the American literary critic Culler sought to establish the notion that linguistics presents the best model of knowledge for the humanities and social sciences. His highly acclaimed book, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (1975), first introduces 'the linguistic model' on the basis of the works of Claude Levi -Strauss, Roman Jacobson, A. J. Greimas, Vladimir Propp, and particularly Roland Barthes and draws attention to the theoretical limitations of each of these thinkers. Secondly, he attempts to synthesise 'the linguistic model' derived from European semiotics and Structuralism of the 1960s, especially that of Saussure and finally he articulates a Structuralist poetics, an effective model for reading literature whose very basic job is 'to make explicit the underlying systems which makes literary effects possible.'

3.4.7 Northrop Fry (1912-1991)

Structuralism in Western culture can be anticipated in the works of the Canadian thinker Northrop Fry who helped in the emergence of a type of criticism called "Myth Criticism" functional in-between 1940-1960. Drawing on anthropology and psychology, he began to consider universal myths, rituals, and folktales; and was also trying to restore the spiritual values to a world he took as alienated, fragmented and commonly ruled by scientism, empiricism, positivism, and technology. In his view, myths were created as integral to human thought. Subsequently, he assumed that literature too emerged out of a collective effort on the part of various cultures and groups to establish a meaningful context of human existence. Northrop Fry's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) emphasized that

criticism should be scientific, objective and systematic discipline, subsequently, his models exhibited recurrent patterns, which were later shared by Structuralist views of language and literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Name some of the key Structuralist thinkers and mention their works?

Q 8: What ideas do you have of Gerard Genette's Narratology?

Q 9: State the major contributions of Jonathan Culler to Structuralism?

3.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

The following are some of the most important concepts that gained popularity under Structuralism.

3.5.1 Structure

Sometimes understood along with the idea of a 'form', 'structure' usually refers to the overall shape and pattern of a text. However, all critical theories, have tried to define the 'structure': or the developing unity of a work. According to the characteristics of that unity, the term may mean pattern, plot, form, argument, language, rhetoric, paradox, metaphor, myth and so on. Starting from such dispositions, the term 'structure' becomes an enabling reference to the internal means, and emphasised features likely to be mostly found in literature and language. The idea of structure should be made clear to you when you read the following by Peter Barry:

"The structures in question here are those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organising experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the external world. It follows from this that meaning or significance isn't a kind of core or essence *inside* things: rather, meaning is always *outside.* Meaning is always

an attribute of things, in the literal sense that meanings are *attributed* to the things by the human mind, not contained within them. However, let's try to be specific about what it might mean to think primarily in terms of structures when considering literature. Imagine that we are confronted with a poem, Donne's 'Good Morrow', let's say. Our immediate reaction as structuralists would probably be to insist that it can only be understood if we first have a clear notion of the genre which it parodies and subverts. Any single poem is an example of a particular genre, and the genre and the example relate to each other rather as a phrase spoken in English relates to the English language as a structure with all its rules, its conventions, and so on. In the case of Donne's poem the relevant genre is the *alba* or 'dawn song', a poetic form dating from the twelfth century in which lovers lament the approach of daybreak because it means that they must part."

3.5.2 Text

A text is a structure composed of elements of signification by which the elements make themselves manifest. Consequently, a text comprises elements of signification, the unit of these elements and the manifestation of this unity. Any attempt to understand the text leads to the question as to how, following what mode of being, the elements of a structured whole are to be defined. Thus, Structuralist analysis dominates the debate around the status of a text. Saussure proposes that language is a system of signs determined by their differences. The interpretation of the text as the system of 'signs' limits the mode of manifestation of the text itself to purely functional structures. In literary theory, and criticism the term 'text' has so far replaced the idea of a 'literary work'. This is significant because a 'work' generally imply the idea of an author, authorial control, and a false notion of aesthetic completeness. With the emergence of theories there could be seen a shift from the author to the reader. Moreover, the term 'work' used to privilege literature at the cost of other forms of rewritings. Hence, the emergence of the

idea of the 'text' helped in imposing textuality on almost everything. Roland Barthes's theory sets itself against the assumptions, which impose authority over the meaning of the text to the author rather than the reader. It is in the context of such an understanding that Barthes's essay "**Death of the Author"** holds its point. In comparison to Structuralism, Poststructuralism views the world itself as a 'text'. The entire cultural network of our life is a text in which we live, think, and chose. This view has been very boldly presented by Derrida in his Of Grammatology where he mentions, "There is nothing outside the text". This means that we know the world through language and that we can locate a kind of textuality of almost everything.

3.5.3 Binary Opposition:

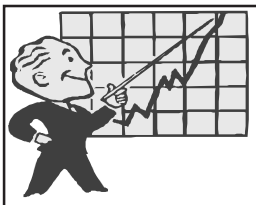
The phrase refers to two mutually exclusive terms such as man/woman, black/white, nature/ culture and so on. It originated in Saussure's ideas on Linguistics. According to Saussure, the Binary Opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term. It is not a contradictory relation but, a structural, complementary one. Saussure demonstrated that a sign's meaning is derived from its context (syntagmatic dimension) and the group (paradigm) to which it belongs. Structuralist critics argue that such oppositions are basic to all cultural phenomena. More specifically, structuralists also argue that meaning itself is relational in the way that we know the meaning of 'right' by virtue of its contrast with the word 'wrong'. In effect, this means that language is built on **a self-contained system of interrelationships**. Structuralist linguistics, defines language as the system of relations, presupposes binary opposites of the phonological elements of language as the basis and model of analysis. As Jonathan Culler points out in his *Structuralist Poetics*, the significance of binarism lies in the fact that it permits one to classify anything. Hence, Binary Opposition is

an important concept of Structuralism, which sees such distinctions as fundamental to all language and thought. Structuralism considers binary opposition as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture, and language.

3.5.4 Sign, Signifier and Signified:

In his *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure presented the idea of the 'sign' and the distinction between the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. For him, the linguistic 'sign' unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image. The 'signifier' whether audible as speech or visible as writing, is only an object of perception. What relates and holds both the 'signifier' and the 'signified' is called the process of signification. Moving out of the traditional philosophical thinking Saussure did not grant any priority to the 'signified' as he could very radically claim that the relationship between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' is arbitrary. Thus, you should try to understand that language for Saussure is a **structured system of conventional 'signs'**, studied in their internal complexity as if frozen in time (synchronically) rather than as changing over time (diachronically).

Saussure further explained that the study of language eventually form part of a larger science of signs in culture, which he called **Semiology,** a field that later scholars like Roland Barthes tried to develop. The atom of language is the sign, which is functionally split into two parts: a 'signifier' (sound-image) and a 'signified' (concept), brought inseparably together like the two sides of the same coin. The relation between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' is "arbitrary" not "motivated" (by natural resemblance), even in cases of onomatopoiea (words that sound like what they mean). However, the 'signifier' and the 'signified' seem to function together as a unit to produce signification, each has *value* only by virtue of the ways in which it differs from other terms. Here, the chain of 'signifiers' and the chain of 'signifieds' diverge. A 'signifier' differs from other 'signifiers' while its 'signified' distinguishes itself from other 'signifieds'.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: Why, do you think, Structuralist Theorists like to use the term 'text' over 'word'?

3.6 RECEPTION OF STRUCTURALISM

If we are to judge the significance and implications of Structuralism we must accept that it is a valid but very dull, technical approach to literary studies. Structuralism tends to reject a life beyond the text preferring to see every book as a 'construct' of certain rules. Moreover, any attempt to interpret a text is often affected by the interpreter's own sense of reality and his/her own values. Hence, the focus on the text alone, rejecting interpretation in favour of a description of the text's operation cannot be fully accepted. Considering everything as a 'construct' and 'order-system' Structuralism presented itself as yet another ordering system. Perhaps, this is the transitional point in which Structuralism becomes Post structuralism. With the emergence of Post structuralism, we enter into an area of total chaos. Because unlike Structuralism, which emphasised on having a farm hold on the text, Poststructuralism came to acknowledge the text's elusive nature and the fallibility of all sorts of readings.

You have read that Ferdinand de Saussure's work provided the groundwork for both Structuralism and Poststructuralism. It was part of the larger 'linguistic turn' in 20th-century philosophy, history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and literary studies. Claude Levi-Strauss, for example, studied myths and kinship systems within different cultures as a system of signs to be interpreted. Roland Barthes explored the semiology of fashion, advertising, travel, and many other cultural phenomena. Jacques Derrida, while critiquing Saussure's privileging of spoken language nevertheless took up the aspects of Saussure's system of differences into what he called *differance.* On the basis of what Saussure says about language as a system, Louis Althusser seemed to have understood that the economic and social structures too possess structural (rather than transitive) causality.

And, Jacques Lacan used Saussure to 're-read' Freud in linguistic terms. However, the very things that made Saussure influential also led to the most serious objections. By focusing on the relation between the 'signifier' and the 'signified', he gained insight into the linguistic structure. However, Structuralism has also been criticised by other critics like Terry Eagleton, who find it impossible to speak of language without speaking of reference, things, history. However, despite these criticisms, the *Course in General Linguistics* opened up the question of the role of 'signs' in culture and the role of language in the mind. As Jonathan Culler put it in his *Ferdinand de Saussure* (1986), "What the study of Language reveals about mind is riot a set of primitive conceptions or natural ideas but the general structuring and differentiating operations by which things are made to signify."

The subsequent periods saw the publication of some very important books on Structuralism. Robert Scholes's *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (1974) and Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (1975) still remain good introductions to Structuralism. Two classic introductions to Structuralism have been John Sturrock's *Structuralism* (2003) and Terence Hawkes's *Structuralism and Semiotics* (2003). Jonathan Culler's massive and wide-ranging book *Structuralism* (2006) collects practically all important structuralist contributions to the humanities and the human sciences. Specifically focused on Narratology are two other classics—Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrating Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978) and Shlomith Rimmon Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983).



3.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Structuralism explores the various possible ways of making meaning rather than meaning itself. It tries to frame the structure and the interrelation of the various elements within that structure. Although Structuralism is closely related to Russian Formalism

and the Prague Linguistic Circle, French Structuralism is distinguished by its variety and interdisciplinary character. Extending itself against the background of Humanism and Phenomenology, it relates itself to the constitution of language and all symbolic or discursive systems. However, while dealing with Structuralism, we must be able to clearly distinguish between Structuralist theory and Structuralist criticism. Theoretically speaking, Structuralism intends to establish a grammar of texts, a set of general rules about how they work. Following Saussurean ideas based on the premise that language is a self-sufficient system operating by its own internal rules and on the relation between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' Structuralists try to formulate the idea that **a text is a self-sufficient system**. Structuralism became famous also through the works of critics like Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Gerard Genette, Jonathan Culler and so on. Ideas of structure, text, binary opposition, sign, signifier and signified are the most important concepts of Structuralism. Although it seems valid, it is also a dull technical approach to literature because a rejection of the conventional interest in life beyond the text will only end up with establishing every book as a 'construct' of certain rules.



3.8 FURTHER READING

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3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Structure is the principle of construction and the object of analysis understood in terms of any 'system'… …structures are the actual carriers of meaning and the various relations between the elements within the structures… … Structuralism bases its premises on the 'constructed' nature of all human activity and its products.

Ans to Q 2: Structuralism formally began with the *Course in General Linguistics,* a series of lectures delivered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure… …Saussure focussed on the underlying

rules and conventions that enable language to operate… …Saussure wanted to show that 'language has its own potentials' and can exist 'outside the individual'.

Ans to Q 3: The New Critics focused on the meaning of a literary text by paying a particular attention to the formal aspects of literature… …they also aimed at 'close reading'… …the theorists of Russian Formalism developed a theory of 'literariness' that differentiated literary texts from other forms of writings like an advertisement, or a newspaper article… …such ideas were to influence Structuralism in later times.

Ans to Q 4: Ferdinand de Saussure is well known for his book *The Course in General Linguistics…. …*he propounded the **"arbitrary"** (purely conventional) nature of the sign… … illustrates this point through his terms *langage, langue,* and *parole… …*Language, for Saussure, is a structured system of conventional signs, studied in their internal complexity as if frozen in time (synchronically) rather than as changing over time (diachronically)… … Saussure further explained the study of language in terms of 'sign', 'signifier' and 'signified', which are explained in the next section.

Ans to Q 5: Levi-Strauss studied how our ancestors, in their evolutionary process, made sense of the world they found themselves in… …the very basic mental operation began to develop on the basis of opposites—some things are edible, some are not, some animals are dangerous, some are not… … that is significant here is the fact that classification in terms of such oppositions in which the opposites are related to each other as the presence or absence of the one will influence the other… …thus, they started to categorize their world in a basic pattern of presences and absences like – light/darkness, man-made/ natural, raw/ cooked, clothes/ necked and so on.

Ans to Q 6: Claude Levi-Strauss's ideas influenced Structuralism as an intellectual movement… …he applied the methods of structural linguistics to Anthropological analysis… …Levi-Strauss's Anthropological Structuralism does not have any direct impact on literarily studies… …Yet, its indirect influence is quite visible in the later developments of both Structuralism and Poststructuralism.

Ans to Q 7: Ferdinand de Saussure (*The Course in General Linguistics*)… … Claude Levi-Strauss (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*)… …Roland Barthes (*Elements of Semiology* and *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*)… …Gerard Genette (*Narrative Discourse*)……Jonathan Culler (*Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*)… …Northrop Fry's (*Anatomy of Criticism*) and so on.

Ans to Q 8: Gerard Genette is known for his Literary Structuralism better known as Narratology… …Genette's focus was on the underlying structures of the content of stories, the way stories are told… …Genette's Structuralist approach is visible in his book *Narrative Discourse* (1972).

Ans to Q 9: Culler tried to assimilate French Structuralism to an Anglo American critical perspective… …his *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (1975), first introduces 'the linguistic model' on the basis of the works of Strauss, Jacobson, Greimas, Propp, and particularly Roland Barthes and draws attention to the theoretical limitations of each of these thinkers… …Secondly, he attempts to synthesise 'the linguistic model' derived from European semiotics with Structuralism of the 1960s,

Ans to Q 10: Because, a 'work' generally implies the idea of an author, authorial control, and a false notion of aesthetic completeness… …the term 'work' used to privilege literature at the cost of other forms of writings… …hence, the emergence of the idea of a 'text' helped in imposing textuality on almost everything… … Barthes in his essay "Death of the Author" imposes authority over the meaning of the text to the author rather than the reader



3.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What does a structuralist critic do while analysing a literary text. Illustrate with reference to the theorists concerned.

Q 2: What, according to you, are Ferdinand de Saussure's contributions to the development of Structuralism? Discuss with reference to the key concepts in Saussure's book *Course in General Linguistics*.

Q 3: Do, you think that Saussure is the real forerunner of Structuralism? Discuss his role in the 'Linguistic Turn' in the Humanities.

Q 4: Discuss the major assumptions of Structuralism with reference to Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette.

Q 5: Find out the significance of Claude Levi-Strauss's Structuralist Anthropology?

Q 6: Structuralism is a dull technical approach to literature because a rejection of the conventional interest in life beyond the text will only end up with establishing every book as a 'construct' of certain rules. Discuss.

Q 7: What are the key concepts in Structuralism? Discuss in detail.

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UNIT 4: POST STRUCTURALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Introducing Poststructuralism

4.4 Major Thinkers of Poststructuralism

- 4.4.1 Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)
- 4.4.2 Michel Foucault (1926-1984)
- 4.4.3 Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)
- 4.4.4 Roland Barthes (1915-1980)
- 4.4.5 Paul de Man (1919-1983)
- 4.4.6 J. Hillis Miller (1928-)

4.5 Post Structuralism and Deconstruction

4.6 Reception of Poststructuralism

4.7 Let us Sum up

4.8 Further Reading

4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

4.10 Possible Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss Post structuralism as approaches to the study of literature
- trace the unique historical and intellectual background out of which it had emerged
- find out the basic properties of Poststructuralism
- make a list of the major Post structuralist critics
- make an assessment of Post structuralism as a theoretical trend

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth unit of this course. This unit deals with Poststructuralism. In the previous unit on Structuralism, we have seen that Poststructuralism is both a continuation and critique of Structuralism.

Actually, the term Post structuralism became a popular critical and theoretical usage during 1970s. Like Structuralism, it is not a unified school of thought or movement. Thinkers most commonly attached to this theoretical trend are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. The dismissal of any 'real' (which means an original, authentic, stable referent, experience and meaning) is both a topic and an effect of Poststructuralism. However, the problematic relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified' or 'event' and 'concept', is perhaps the most important issue in Poststructuralism. What makes Poststructuralist theory a relevant way of looking at the contemporary world of change is the 'erasure' or weakening of divisions between 'signifier' and 'signified', reading and writing, literature and criticism. By the time we finish reading this unit, we shall not only be able to discuss Post structuralism and its major exponents but shall also make ourselves comfortable to understand the difficult concepts usually studied along with Post structuralism.

4.3 INTRODUCING POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Post structuralism is a vast area of discussion. In this section, I will try to deal with some very specific aspects of Poststructuralism. Poststructuralism has much to do with structuralism itself. Because, Poststructuralism began partly as the continuation of and partly as the reaction against Structuralism. Hence, there is a valid ground to state that the premises and findings of Structuralism established the basis for Poststructuralism. It has also been argued that Poststructuralism began with a suspicion of Structuralism's tendency to impose a comprehensive theory on literature. Thus, it is concerned less with having a firm hold over the text than with celebrating the text's elusive nature and the fallibility of all readings. As a theoretical tool, it has derived much from Jacques Derrida's idea that **language is an infinite chain of words having no extra-lingual origin or end**. According to Derrida, a text should be seen as an endless stream of 'signifiers' without any final meaning. Such a view rejects the functionality of elements like common sense and reason the readers have in their minds, as they want to pull the text into his or her own frame of

reference. At the same time, any attempt at imposing an order on language on the part of the writer, also proves to be inadequate. Such thinking resulted in his most acclaimed theoretical concept known as **Deconstruction**, which is often used interchangeably with Poststructuralism. In another sense, Poststructuralism takes an interdisciplinary stance by incorporating all other approaches that developed after Structuralism.

It is important to explore how Poststructuralists accounts of literature often stem from **deconstructive theory** in terms of the three interconnected concepts: 'textuality' (or floating signifiers), 'rhetoricity', and 'intertextuality'. Because the signifier (word) is disconnected from the 'signified' (concept) and the 'referent' (thing), language floats or slides in relation to reality. It is a condition made more rigorous with the additional sliding introduced into language by figurative language, such as 'metaphors' and 'metonymies'. Such 'rhetoricity' (as it is called) adds layers of substitutions and supplements (more differences) into floating signifiers. 'Textuality' and 'rhetoricity' are conditioned by yet a third sliding or differential element known as 'intertextuality' which refers to a text's dependence on prior words, concepts, connotations, codes, conventions, unconscious practices, and texts. Thus, every text is an 'intertext' that consciously and unconsciously borrows from the immense archive of previous culture.



LET US KNOW

The technical term **dissemination** is commonly employed to name the deconstructive concept of textual meaning. The linguistic, rhetorical, and intertextual properties of language undermine or **deconstruct** stable meaning. Poststructuralist theories of language, whether they focus on floating signifiers, rhetoricity, intertextuality, dissemination and so on, typically bring traditional mimetic, expressive, didactic, and formalist theories into crisis but do not flatly invalidate their claims.

Post structuralist thinkers opined that theory has more than literature to account for. Since everything, from the unconscious to social and cultural

practices, is seen as functioning like a language, the goal of Poststructuralist theorists is to find out what controls interpretation and meaning in all possible system of signification. In the recent decades, Poststructuralism has set the terms and the agenda for many of the major developments and debates in the field of theory and criticism. You will note that it has played a significant role in shaping the direction of other schools and movements, particularly Feminist criticism, Postcolonial theory, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, and Queer Theory. Thus, originally a radical movement of French literary intellectuals and philosophers who came into prominence during the 1960s and 1970s, and who all were critical of Structuralism, it quickly spread to intellectuals around the globe. By the close of the twentieth century, Poststructuralism had become the leading edge of Postmodernism. The main features of Poststructuralism include: the problematising of linguistic preferentiality, the emphasis on heteroglossia, the decentering of the subject, the rejection of "reason" as universal or foundational, the criticism of humanism, and a stress on difference.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What connection does Poststructuralism share with Structuralism?

Q 2: Which are the schools and movements influenced by Poststructuralism?

4.4 MAJOR THINKERS OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The following are the most prominent thinkers labelled as Poststructuralist.

4.4.1 Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

Derrida was a French thinker who taught philosophy at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris. He made a tremendous impact on contemporary literary studies, especially in the universities of America where his notion of '**Deconstruction**' became a major intellectual force in 1970s and 80s. Derrida's intellectual deliberations

were directed against metaphysics that extends from Nietzsche to Heideggar. His critique of the 'presence of consciousness' owes much to Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious. His challenge against the idealist concept of language is an extension of principles laid down by Ferdinand de Saussure and his Structuralist undertakings.

In 1967, Derrida published his first three books in French: *La Voixet le'phtnomene (Speech and Phenomena), De la Grammatologie (Of Grammatology)* and *L'E: criture et la* diffarance *(Writing and Difference).* Derrida published three more books in 1972: *La Dissemination (Dissemination), Marges en la phllosophle (Margins of Philosophy)* and *Positions.* You should note that these early books are the yardstick for deconstructive literary criticism. In 1975, Derrida was invited to teach at Yale University, where he was soon considered a member of the so-called Yale School (along with Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom). From then on, his career was split between two countries, as his role became embattled and marginalised in France and increasingly active and important in the United States. Derrida died of cancer in Paris at the age of 74.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the major intellectual deliberations of Jacques Derrida?

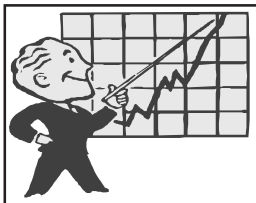
Q 4: Why is the conference held in Johns Hopkins University is significant?

4.4.2 Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

Foucault has been described variously as a philosopher, social scientist, and historian of ideas. His works call attention to the role of language in the exercise and preservation of power. Unlike the Structuralists like Levi-Strauss and Barthes, who used language and linguistics as their methodological tool, Foucault used the history

of social and political institutions and discourses. His claim over the instability of any universal truth had a powerful impact on writing of literary history in Britain and America. Foucault believes that the world is more than a galaxy of texts, and that some theories of textuality usually ignore the fact that any discourse is discursively formed out of a power politics. Such discourses reduce the political and cosmic forces and ideological and social control to aspects of signifying processes. His major publications include *Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Order of Things* (1970), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and a multi-volumed *History of Sexuality* left unfinished by his sudden death.

In a 1976 lecture series, Foucault briefly summarized the general impetus of the Poststructuralist movement like this: "...For the last ten or fifteen years, the immense and proliferating criticisability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses; a sort of general feeling that the ground was crumbling beneath our feet, especially in places where it seemed most familiar, most solid, and closest to us, to our bodies, to our everyday gestures. But alongside this crumbling and the astonishing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local critiques, the facts were also revealing something... beneath this whole thematic, through it and even within it, we have seen what might be called the insurrection of subjugated knowledges." [Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 7th January 1976]



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Mention some of the important works of Michel Foucault.

Q 6: What is the role of an author, according to Foucault?

4.4.3 Jacques Lacan (1901-1981):

Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, entered the Freudian psychoanalytical movement in 1936. However, his radical critique

of the orthodox psychoanalytical theory and practice led to his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1959. The publication of his research papers and articles later published as *Ecrits* (1964) in Paris made him one of the leading figures who influenced the International Dissemination of Structuralist and Poststructuralist ideas of language, literature, and the nature of the human subject. His most celebrated theory: "The Unconscious is Structured Like a Language", implied his borrowing of methods and concepts of modern linguistics and tried to question Saussure's assumption that there is nothing problematic about the bond between the 'signified' and the 'signifier' by pointing out that the two 'signifiers' ladies and gentlemen may refer to the same signified–a toilet. He concluded that language, the signifying chain, has a life of its own, which cannot be anchored to a word or thing. Perhaps, this is how his **poststructuralist inclinations** come to the forefront.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: In what way, can we call Lacan a Poststructuralist critic?

4.4.4 Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

In the previous unit, you have read about Roland Barthes as a structuralist thinker. However, Roland Barthes' Poststructuralism is best represented by his essay "Death of the Author". Rejecting and dismissing the traditional notion of the author's being the origin of the text, the source of meaning and the only authority of the interpretation. His author is stripped off all metaphysical status and finally reduced to allocation where language with its citations, repetitions, echoes and references crosses and re-crosses. The reader is thus free to enter the text from any direction. Barthes' Post structuralist notions lie in the premise that readers are free to open and close the text's signifying processes without respect for the signified.

4.4.5 Paul de Man (1919-1983)

Paul de Man was born and schooled in Antwerp, Belgium. In 1937, he entered the University of Brussels, first studying engineering and eventually taking degrees in Chemistry (1940) and then Philosophy (1942). Though he began his academic career relatively late in life, he quickly rose to prominence, teaching at Cornell University from 1960 to 1967, intermittently at the University of Zurich from 1963 to 1970, and at Johns Hopkins University from 1968 to 1970. In 1970, he moved to Yale University, where he was appointed Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature in 1979.

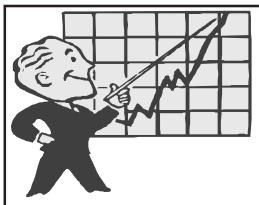
Paul de Man is often credited with establishing 'Deconstruction' as a valid theoretical tool. Inspired by Derrida, during 1970s, he made Yale the centre of Deconstructive criticism. He was mostly interested in the interdisciplinary mix of literature, philosophy and linguistics the components of theory. He is known for his influential books *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979). These two books are regarded as rigorous works of 'Deconstruction'. De Man is concerned with the theory of tropes, which accompanies rhetorical treatise. Figures of speech (tropes) allow writers to say one thing but mean something else: to substitute one sign for another (metaphor) and to displace meaning from one sign in a chain of signification to another (metonymy). Tropes tend to pervade the world of language by destabilising Logic, thereby denying the possibility of straightforward literal or referential use of language. Take for example, the question: Tea or Coffee? One may reply "Whats the difference?" While doing so, one may produce two meanings. One rhetorical "It makes no difference which I chose", and the other, literal-"what is the difference between tea and coffee." De Man grounds his theory on a meticulous 'close reading' of specific texts, and considers that it is the effect of language and rhetoric that prevents direct representation of the real. For de Man, every reading is a **mis-**

reading, because tropes intervene between critical and literary texts. His most radical belief is that literary texts are 'self-deconstructing' means that a literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of his own rhetorical mode. The 'interpreter' or 'deconstructor' has nothing to do except to collude with the text's own processes. With these ideas, de Man became the most influential literary theorist of the Yale School, and perhaps of his generation. In 1983, at the height of his influence, de Man died of cancer.



LET US KNOW

De Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric" aims at the semiological approaches characteristic of French Structuralism, which attempt to develop a grammar of literary structure on the scientific model of linguistics. Using William Butler Yeats's poem "Among Schoolchildren" (1928) as a test case, de Man shows how meaning cannot be determined by grammar but is exceeded by the figural properties of language. Focusing on the poem's famous last line, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" he adduces two different readings, taking it first as a rhetorical question reinforcing the images of unity in the poem (the standard interpretation) and then as a serious question that culminates in an image of dramatic uncertainty rather than unity. These yield "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings," and thus "the entire scheme set up by the first reading can be undermined, or deconstructed, in terms of the second." Thus, de Man brings home his point about the limitations of Structuralism as well as of the Hermeneutic approaches; de Man shows how the poem's rhetoric renders interpretation undecidable. He calls this the "rhetorization of grammar."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: How does Paul de Man view "Rhetorical Meaning"?

Q 9: Why does de Man use Yeats' poem "Among School Children"

4.4.6 J. Hillis Miller (1928-)

J. Hillis Miller is an American Literary Critic who has been heavily influenced by Deconstruction. As a critic he was specialized in Victorian and modern literature, as well as in American and European literature of the past two centuries. He was closely aligned, first, to phenomenological criticism or "criticism of consciousness," and then, after 1968, to deconstruction. Miller received his BA in English from Oberlin College in 1948 and his PhD from Harvard in 1952, for a dissertation entitled "The symbolic imagery of Charles Dickens." It made use of Kenneth Burke's idea that a literary work is a form of "symbolic action" in which its author attempts to work out indirectly some personal problem or impasse. After teaching at Williams College for a year, he taught for 19 years at Johns Hopkins University, then 14 years at Yale, after which, in 1986, he moved to the University of California at Irvine, as a Professor of Comparative Literature and English Emeritus. He has been the President of the Modern Language Association of America in 1986.

Known for his works like *The Disappearance Of God* (1963), *Poets of Reality* (1965), Miller became a follower of Derrida by attending Derrida's seminars at Hopkins and then at Yale and Irvine, and applied his theory and method to interpret literary criticism. In his essay "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" Miller famously explained that "**Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself."** This is an important statement as it helps to understand that texts are subjected to a kind of uncovering of structures that operate in a text and these structures can be

dismantled by making use of the elements of the text itself. The concerns of Miller can also be traced in his next three books, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970); *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (1982); *The Linguistic Moment* (1985). Later on Miller moved to Yale in 1972, and became a close colleague of reputed critics like Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man. Along with Jacques Derrida, who moved to Yale from Johns Hopkins for annual seminars, these five critics and theorists collectively became known as the **Yale School**. In 1979, they published a joint venture called *Deconstruction and Criticism*.



LET US KNOW

In spite of Miller's evident focus on readings of literary works, his more purely theoretical essays have been widely read and anthologized. One of his most famous articles, written during his time at Yale, is "The Critic as Host" (1977). Given in response to an attack on deconstruction by the critic M. H. Abrams, Miller asks what "happens when a critical essay extracts a 'passage' and cites it?...Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or it is the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation, which is its host" (439). Miller analyses the logic of "parasite" and "host," pointing out that "guest" has the same origin as "host," and that the order of "parasite" and "host" is complex and often reversible. [Read 'The Critic as Host', in Lodge and Wood]

Miller in his book *For Derrida* (2009) gathers all the essays on specific aspects of Derrida's work that he had written for conferences and journals since Derrida's death in 2004. This book exemplifies his conviction that a philosopher-theorist-critic like Derrida cannot be encapsulated in just a few putatively totalising formulas taken out of context.

4.5 POST STRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction is a term that was originated by the post structuralist thinker and philosopher Jacques Derrida. It denotes a particular approach or practice to understanding the relationship between text and meaning. Derrida's approach consisted of conducting readings of texts countering the intended meaning or structural unity of that text. In her book *The Critical Difference* (1981), Barbara Johnson clarifies the term like the following:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction', however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo'-a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct.' The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by *the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself* [my italics]. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading, which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself.

One could say that while Post-structuralism develops as a response to, and displacement of, Structuralism, Deconstruction focuses on rhetoric and reflexivity (i.e. the self-referential aspects of language) in a way that the American New Critics had encouraged earlier in the century. As already mentioned, Deconstruction owes much to the theories of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida whose essay "Structure, Sign and Pay in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966) began a new critical movement. Deconstruction, so far, has been the most influential feature of Post-structuralism because it defines a new kind of reading practice, which is a key application of Post-structuralism.

According to Derrida, a text (any text-be it a polemic, a philosophical treatise, a poem, or, for that matter, an exercise in deconstructive criticism) can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be (or may have been) seen

by criticism as a single, stable 'meaning.' Thus, a deconstructive criticism of a text reveals that there is nothing except the text. Derrida evinced that the language of any discourse is at variance with itself and, by so being, is capable of being read as yet another language. Thus, hypothetically, one may envisage an endless regression of dialectical interpretations and readings without any stable essential meaning. In short, a text may possess so many different meanings that it cannot have A MEANING. There is no guaranteed essential meaning. An immediate deconstructive practice would be to question the foregoing sentence by asking what is meant by 'guaranteed', 'essential' and 'meaning' in that context.

As a form of textual analysis, associated mainly with Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction later became part of critical discussions began by the American critic Paul de Man and his fellow deconstructionists from Yale University Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman and J. Hillis Miller. One of the principal premises of Post Structuralism, Deconstruction rendered an important influence on literary studies. Thanks also in part to Derrida's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; it has had a major impact upon Postcolonial theory and Queer Theory, as we shall read in Block 3 of this course.

4.6 RECEPTION OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The greatest success of Poststructuralism in the domains of Aesthetics as well as textual interpretations is the assertion that no text can ever be considered complete in itself or as communicating a fixed meaning over time. It also dismissed the claim of the author's producing or controlling meaning or interpretation and that of the critic's offering a definitive meaning of the author's supposed intentions. In one sense, 'Deconstruction' had a tremendous influence on the entire field of literary criticism of the last three decades, by blurring the division between fiction and theory, literature and philosophy, reading and writing and the critic and the reader. Together with the Psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, Derrida's 'Deconstruction' launched a new category of writing Reading of Lacan reading Freud, of Derrida re-reading Plato and Rousseau, of Barthes reading Balzac. The developments in the field of literary theory and criticism in the last decades of the 20th

century is partly a rejection of and partly a reaction to 'Deconstruction'. In fact, it enabled the people to see that the order of the 'world out there' is not something given, but something that is chosen to be 'constructed' through language. 'Deconstruction' provided a new angle from which that structure of Western society is sought to be analysed.

Although Deconstruction as a method has revolutionised the ways of interpretations, it is not free from its limitations. Traditional thinkers would say that Deconstruction is valid only in the theoretical level because a reader may share a context of understanding with the writer and try to assign meaning to what the text says accordingly. The traditional objection to 'Deconstruction' is that it is a form of criticism, which, rather than valuing what the text says, emphasises a text's difficulties in saying that. However, Deconstruction has succeeded in standing against all sorts of allegations. Because, it has over time, developed into a method adopted by many critics with a wide range of approaches to literature—Ethnic, Feminist, New-historicist, Marxist, and Postcolonial. Edward Said, who is said to have inaugurated Post Colonial Criticism, is just one of the many who has imported the notions of 'Deconstruction' from the literary to the non-literary arena. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Said deconstructed the East/ West, Orient/ Occident binaries, and the stereotypes it entailed.



4.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, we have understood that Poststructuralism is the working out of the various implications of Structuralism. However, it is also quite evident that Poststructuralism defies many of the assumptions of Structuralism. The important thing to notice is that Structuralism set out to master the text and open its secrets. Poststructuralism instead believed that this desire is futile because there are various unconscious, or linguistic or historical forces, which cannot be mastered. In this unit, the different concepts and ideas of Poststructuralism have been explored in connection with the contributions made by thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, de

Man, and Miller. A deconstructive reading, as stated by Derrida, seeks to expose the various contradictory forces within the text itself, dissipates the fixity of the structure and meanings into an incompatible and undecidable possibilities. A deconstructive reading is a sort of 'double-reading' which means that it acknowledges the ways a writer makes an attempt to order things, but at the same time also points to the contradictions and problems in the text. Derrida's Deconstruction as a method, closely considers an individual text, searching for its inherent contradictions. However, he did not propose Deconstruction as a mode of literary criticism, but as a new way of reading all types of texts. You have learnt that Lacan made an entry into Post structuralist ideas through his engagement with psychoanalysis, and Foucault through the discussion of power and discourse.



4.8 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poststructuralism

4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Poststructuralism began partly as the continuation of and partly as the reaction against Structuralism… ...Poststructuralism began with a suspicion of Structuralism's tendency to impose a comprehensive theory on literature… …Thus, it is concerned less with having a firm hold over the text than with celebrating the text's elusive nature and the fallibility of all readings.

Ans to Q 2: Poststructuralism influenced Feminist criticism, Postcolonial theory, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, and Queer Theory… …Poststructuralism had become the leading edge of Postmodernism.

Ans to Q 3: His notion of 'Deconstruction' that became a major intellectual force in 1970s and 80s…. …his critique of the 'presence of consciousness'… …l**ogocentric** argument that spoken language is superior to written language… … "sign", "signifier" and "signified"… … "supplement".

Ans to Q 4: In 1966, Derrida gave a landmark lecture at the conference "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" at Johns Hopkins University… …that conference helped shape how Structuralism and Poststructuralism began to influence literary studies in the United States… …Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," was fundamental in articulating what was later seen as the "break" between the two schools.

Ans to Q 5: *Madness and Civilisation… …The Birth of the Clinic… …The Order of Things… … The Archaeology of Knowledge… …Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.*

Ans to Q 6: In his essay "What Is an Author?" Foucault asked what "functions" the category called "author" fulfils within the "discourse" the historian or critic deploys in the analysis of written texts… …He pointed out that the concept of *author* is an organising device, permitting us to group certain texts together… …the author thus functions both to organise the vast reservoir of materials that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of interpreting those materials.

Ans to Q 7: Lacan, entered the Freudian psychoanalytical movement in 1936… …through the papers and articles in his *Ecrits* (1964), he influenced the International Dissemination of Structuralist and Poststructuralist ideas of language, literature, and the nature of the human subject… … his most celebrated theory: "The Unconscious is Structured Like a Language" questioned Saussure's assumption that there is nothing problematic about the bond between the 'signified' and the 'signifier'… …this is how his poststructuralist inclinations became prominent.

Ans to Q 8: De Man is concerned with the theory of tropes which accompanies rhetorical treatise… … Figures of speech (tropes) allow writers to say one thing but mean something else… …to the question Tea or Coffee? one may reply "Whats the difference?"…. …there may be two meaning of the answer: one rhetorical "It makes no difference which I chose", and the other, literal—"what is the difference between tea and coffee." ... ... This is how "Rhetorical Meaning" is differentiated from "Literal Meaning".

Ans to Q 9: De Man used William Butler Yeats's poem "Among Schoolchildren" to shows how meaning cannot be determined by grammar… … the poem's famous last line, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" provides two different readings… …, which yield "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings" and

thus "the entire scheme set up by the first reading can be undermined, or deconstructed, in terms of the second.

Ans to Q 10: Structure, Sign and Play… …'Logocentrism'… …Supplement… …Difference… …Aporia and so on.

Ans to Q 11: For Lacan "The unconscious is structured like a language." This does not mean that the 'unconscious' *is* language, but that the 'unconscious' is *like* a language. In other words, the 'unconscious' is *structured,* not amorphous, and it *speaks* rhetorically through the dreams, mistakes, and symptoms of the subject.



4.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What do you understand by the term Poststructuralism? How did it react to Structuralist tendency to impose a comprehensive theory in literature?

Q 2: What idea do you get of Derrida's 'Deconstruction' from your reading of this unit?

Q 3: Do you consider 'Deconstruction' to be a valid method of critiquing established notions in Literary Studies.?

Q 4: Discuss the main ideas of the key thinkers of Poststructuralism?

Q 5: How did Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller establish Deconstruction as an important tool for analysis?

Q 6: Discuss Lacan and Foucault as Post structuralist theorists and elaborate on their contributions.

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UNIT 5: NEW HISTORICISM AND CULTURAL MATERIALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Introducing New Historicism

5.3.1 Major Theorist: Stephen Greenblatt

5.4 Introducing Cultural Materialism

5.4.1 Common Agenda between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism

5.4.2 Major Theorists

5.4.3 Important Concepts in Cultural Materialism

5.5 Reception of These Theories

5.6 Let us Sum up

5.7 Further Reading

5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.9 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss New Historicism and Cultural Materialism as two very important trends in Literary Theory
- trace the growth and development of both the trends
- make a list of the major theorists of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism
- examine the concepts propounded by the theorists in question
- assess the reception of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism in subsequent critical periods

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth unit of the course. In this unit, we shall get to lean about New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. New Historicism, which

emerged in 1980s in the field of Renaissance Studies, designates a kind of writing marked by components such as rejection of the compartmentalisation of disciplines, attention to economic and historical contexts of culture, self-reflexivity in the act of writing about culture, and intertextuality of texts and discourses. New Historicism seeks to reconstruct a literary text as a historical object by considering the ways and methods not included in traditional literary studies. Cultural Materialism, on the other hand, was initiated in Britain. It is a theoretical approach to literature proposed by Raymond Williams during 1970s. This theory was later redefined by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in the mid 1980s as they applied it to the study of Renaissance drama. Rooted in Marxism, it stresses the interaction between cultural creations such as literature and their historical context that also includes social, political and economic elements. By the time we finish reading this unit, we shall learn how to use the resources of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism in your analysis of literary texts. We also learn that both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism are part of a broader sea change in the studies of history and literature.

5.3 INTRODUCING NEW HISTORICISM

Although the term 'historicism' had been in use before, New Historicism received its current meaning in 1982, when the prominent new historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt used it to describe recent work of himself and others on the Renaissance period. Many commentators would like to situate its origin in 1980s, in Greenblatt's book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. In the introduction to the special issue of *Genre* (1982), Greenblatt remarked: "The New Historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It tends to ask questions about its own methodological assumptions and those of others". The first institutional centre of New Historicism is the journal called *Representations* (1983-) edited by Greenblatt himself and others. The New Historicist thinkers believe that they do not form a single school of thought, because theirs is a consolidation of 'themes, preoccupations and attitudes'. They both criticise and incorporate aspects of traditional and contemporary theory. It retains

some of the techniques of New Critical 'close reading' with its assumption of a literary text as a container of meaning. Similarly, it critiques the 'ahistorical' tendencies of Structuralism and Deconstruction.

For the students of literature New Historicism is important for two obvious reasons.

First, it rejects the Base-Super Structure model of Marxism although it retains the Marxist notion that human beings and their artefacts are "constructed by social and historical forces."

Secondly, it repudiates the 'history of ideas' approaches of the Renaissance Studies scholars like Douglash Bush, C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard who are criticised for their homogenous representations of historical periods.

Thus, concentrating on the relation between literature and history the New Historicist critics have devised alternative reading practices. They opine that forms of discourse, artistic or documentary, popular or elitist, often interact with and are determined by other discourses and institutional practices in a specific historical moment. Thus, they presuppose both 'the historicity of texts' and 'the textuality of history' in the words of the American literary theorist Louis Montrose. Different ideas can be derived from concepts like 'historicity' and 'textuality'. For instance, Montrose stresses 'historicity' in connection with the Elizabethan notion of pastoral that describes land holding practices and the hierarchical relations of the Elizabethan court. While, Greenblatt emphasises 'textuality' he argues in the book *Renaissance Self Fashioning* that the self is a literary construct of the text, and historical personages are inscribed in documents as textual systems. An increased awareness of the ways in which the self can be fashioned leads to an increased awareness of how the self is subject to power relations and how it always functions within larger structures that may even completely control whatever self-fashioning seemed initially possible. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* ultimately subscribes to the notion that the self is always a construction, that our identity is never given, but always the 'product' or 'construct' of an interaction between the way we want to represent ourselves, through the stories we tell (or the incidents we suppress) and our actual presentations, and the power relations we are part of.

However, you should note that New Historicism neither privilege 'historicity' nor 'textuality'. Instead, the main focus here is on the mediation and interaction between the two. New Historicism tends to read a literary text as constituted within historically specific institutions. Thus, Greenblatt states that in Elizabethan Theatre "each play is bound up with the theatre's long term institutional strategy…An individual play mediates between the mode of theatre, understood in its historical specificity, and the elements of society out of which that theatre has been differentiated. [As stated in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. P-14] Louis Montrose also states that New Historicist scholars relate the historicity and textuality of their own subject position by making various self-reflexive gestures. In doing so, the writer is placed in a problematic relation to the historical object being written about. Besides, the histories the writer reconstructs are the textual constructs of critics who are, themselves historical subjects.



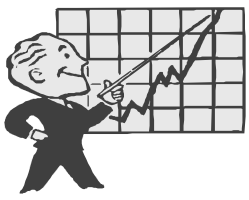
LET US KNOW

We should pay attention to the fact that many literary scholars have incorporated the concerns of Cultural Studies into the historical analysis of literature. For example, they have examined class conflicts, hegemonic forces, and racial and gender codes in William Shakespeare's plays, Charles Dickens's novels, and Walt Whitman's poetry. Particularly important in this regard is the critical movement known as the New Historicism which studies literary texts not as autonomous objects but as material products emerging out of specific social, cultural, and political contexts. This view of literature breaks down the traditional distinction between literary and non-literary texts and forms. Typically, New Historicists demonstrate the ways in which the power relations of a particular era shape how literature is produced, distributed, and consumed, making use of a wide range of contemporary materials-everything from diaries and travel writings to legal documents to medical and penal records.

New Historicism is based on Foucault's ideas on 'power', Raymond Williams' 'culture' and Louis Althusser's 'ideology'. By using those ideas, New Historicism specifies the historical contexts in which a particular literary text is to be read.

Thus, the New Historicist not only pays attention to the discursive disputes in a particular text but also examines how a particular text is addressed to other texts, other discursive orders, in the wider culture. Unlike the old historicist, the New Historicist does not expect that cultural moment is unified, with the literary text simply reflecting or embodying that unity. The text is rather a dynamic interweaving of multiple strands from a culture that is itself an unstable field of contending forces. Any given text for the New Historicist is an attempted intervention in the ongoing struggle to influence or even dominate the cultural field. To explain how Shakespeare's *Richard II* is implicated in the power struggles of its time is both to write a history of the consolidation of power, and to awaken today's reader to the conflicts that we experience at the present.

New Historicism remains political while denying that any social world is stable and that artworks are separated from the power-struggles constituting social reality. The literary work is a player in the competition, among various groups to gain their ends, that takes place on many levels. New Historicism accepts Foucault's ideas that power operates through different channels, which include not just direct governmental action but also, the daily routines and language. The New Historicists often construct narratives in which dispersed and disputed power becomes more insidious, and dominance grows more dominant. They want to emphasize the contingencies and fluidity of history in a given moment. However, they also, emphasise how history reveals the growth of forms of power that continuously affect the lives of the common subjects.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What do you understand by the term New Historicism? How is Greenblatt associated with NH?

Q 2: What is the scope of New Historicism?

Q 3: How is the idea of 'history' viewed in NH?

5.3.1 Major Theorist: Stephen Greenblatt (1943-)

Stephen Greenblatt was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1943 and did his undergraduate and graduate studies at Yale University, gaining his PhD in 1969. For more than twenty years, he taught at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was one of the founders of the journal *Representations,* in which there appeared for the first time the path breaking New Historicist works. He moved to Harvard University in the mid 1990s. A leading proponent of New Historicism, he became a key figure in the shift from literary to cultural poetics and from textual to contextual interpretation in American critical scene during 1980s and 1990s. He was mostly inspired by Michel Foucault's historical investigations of medical and penal institutions and his theoretical views of power. For Greenblatt, literary works are "fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses." In an important essay entitled "Invisible Bullets" (1981), echoing Foucault's pessimistic strain, Greenblatt argues that Renaissance subversion inevitably played into the hands of power. In fact, power *needs* subversion and actively produces it: 'subversiveness is the very product of that power and furthers its ends'. His *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991) is yet another important addition to his New Historicist criticism. It examines the role that 'wonder' plays in the response of European explorers and travellers to the New World. He characteristically sees that 'wonder' as 'an agent of appropriation' in the sense that the expressions of 'wonder' function as an instrument of power. Under Greenblatt's investigation, 'European' representational practices turn out to have played a vital role in the process of colonisation that followed exploration and travel by the Europeans.

5.4 INTRODUCING CULTURAL MATERIALISM

The term Cultural Materialism refers to 20th-century attempts at applying the Marxist notion of materialism to the study of culture. It was first used by Raymond Williams more than a century after Marx's own deliberations on "historical" and later "dialectical" materialism. Williams explored the term 'materialism' in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Thus, Cultural Materialism, as set forth by Williams, attempts to show that classic Marxism's negative answer to questions about the nature of cultural production was misguided. Thus, Williams tried to explore classical Marxism, which according to him, is not materialist enough. For Williams, material activity is not limited to what Marx might have termed "the production and reproduction of real life." He is concerned explicitly to extend the term to any practical activity in which an individual establishes, maintains, or changes specifically human relationships (physically, to nature, and socially, to one another). He often refers to such activities as "constitutive", an opposite term to "instrumental", and is concerned to demonstrate that many activities, which Marx might have considered "instrumental", are in fact "constitutive." In the first four chapters of the book, he dismantles a number of "Basic Concepts," namely "culture," "language," "literature," and "ideology." In each case, he takes a concept which classical Marxism assigns to the 'superstructure', reveals current problems in the definition of the concept, and demonstrates that the concept can be found to have referred to a "practical" (or "basic") activity, but that this meaning has been historically erased, by Marxism and other schools of thought. He then proposes a contemporary redefinition of the term, which returns it to the "material" realm.

Cultural Materialist criticism gradually established itself permanently in the field of literary studies in the mid-1980s, with the publication of Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (1984), of Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985), and of two collections of essays: *Alternative Shakespeares* (1985) edited by John Drakakis, and *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985) edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield.

Dollimore and Sinfield, in their edited book *Political Shakespeare* declares their stance over Cultural Materialism. Their approach was based on a "a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis . . . [w]e call this 'cultural materialism'" (vii). The "political commitment" referred to is specified as "socialist and feminist" not "Marxist" and the elements in which it is placed are really not derived from Williams at all. With their relentless questioning and undermining of traditional approaches to Shakespeare, Dollimore and Sinfield significantly altered the teaching of Shakespeare in the academy.

Both Dollimore and Sinfield are famous for their book *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985) in which they introduced Raymond Williams' theory to the study of Shakespearean drama and defined their parameters in their own terms. Noting the significance of the terms 'cultural' and 'material' they tried to explain that the theory combines two meanings: the analytical term 'culture' referring to social systems studied in Anthropology and Social Sciences; and the evaluative term culture referring to art and literature as form of 'high culture'. They tend to suggest that literary texts 'represent' rather than 'transcend' or 'reflect' material reality and asserts the potentials of literature both to interact and intervene in accepted practices and beliefs. As they state in the Introduction to their book *Political Shakespeare,* that the essays included in the book indicate that Cultural Materialism involves 'historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis' (viii). They took theory to be overlapping with and including studies of History, Sociology, Feminism, Marxism and Post structuralism.



LET US KNOW

Louis Althusser, the French Marxist philosopher starts his essay on the "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation" with an acknowledgment that "any social order has to include the conditions for its own continuance, and capitalism and patriarchy do this partly through the education system."

For Sinfield, Shakespeare is generally appropriated by the educational state as a means of constructing its subjects (school pupils) within the dominant bourgeois ideology. One can observe this not only in the ideological framework implicit in the questions, which they are permitted to answer, but also in the questions, they are not asked. There is little encouragement, for example, to view Shakespeare in relation to the economics, politics, or social history of his day.

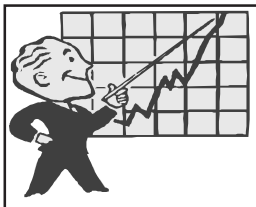
5.4.1 Common Agenda between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism [Adapted from Hens Bertens]

1. Both the trends brought to the then still traditional study of Renaissance literature, in particular the work of Shakespeare, a mixture of Marxist and Post structuralist orientations, in particular Post structuralist notions of the 'self', of discourse, and of power. New Historicism leaned more towards a (Foucauldian) Post structuralism in its focus on power, on the discourses that serve as vehicles for power, on the construction of identity, and other Post structuralist issues, while Cultural Materialism leaned more towards the Marxism of Raymond Williams and its focus on ideology, on the role of institutions, and on the possibilities for subversion or dissidence.
2. Both reject the individual genius of the author and the autonomy of the literary work and see literary texts as absolutely inseparable from their historical context. The role of the author is not completely negated, but it is a role that the author is at best in command of. The author's role is to a large extent determined by historical circumstances. As the prominent New Historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt put it: "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society."
3. They do not see literature as a special category of transcendent, essentially ahistorical texts. Both treat literary texts in the same

way that they treat other texts. For their specific purposes, they bring to light the relations of power and processes of ideological and cultural construction.

4. Finally, in their conviction that culture, including all beliefs and values, is a construction, the New Historicists and Cultural Materialists are willing to grant that their own assumptions must also be constructed and may therefore be deconstructed. However, that does not prevent them from taking up political positions that are motivated by a political vision.

If New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have so much in common what could possibly distinguish them? One distinctive feature is the role that subversion, or dissent, is allowed to play in them. As Catherine Belsey argued, the New Historicism's view of culture 'allows no space for dissent. Instead, minor revolts simply offer occasions for extending social control; crime legitimates an extension of the police'. Where new historicists would be satisfied to bring to light hidden power relations in a cluster of Renaissance texts, cultural materialists seek to find instances of dissidence, subversion, and transgression that are relevant in contemporary political struggles. Because of this double focus, Cultural Materialism is deeply interested in the ways in which literature from the past, say the works of Shakespeare, has been made to function in later periods and in our contemporary culture.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Who used the term Cultural Materialism? Why is materialism important in CM?

Q 5: What are the common aspects between NH and CM?

Q 6: What is the basic difference between NH and CM?

5.4.2 Major Theorists

The following is a list of the major theorists of Cultural Materialism

Raymond Williams (1921-1988)

Raymond Williams was a literary critic, cultural theorist and political activist. His critique of English culture became more and more prominent through his long engagement with its literature and institutions, and a growing affinity with the continental currents of thoughts. In all his works, as he wrote in his *Politics and Letters,* he was writing mainly against two traditions: "one which has totally spiritualised cultural production, the other which has relegated it to secondary status". He also opined that the prevailing "categories of literature and criticism were so deeply compromised that they had to be challenged in toto". According to him, the whole range of 'imaginative literature' was confined to specialised groups of readers and was often excluded from other writings and activities. Thus, it became so complicated in the capitalist system of meanings, values, and divisions of labour that it had become an obstacle in the fuller attainment of values.

He is well known for his pioneering contributions to Cultural Studies. He refined terms such as 'structure of feelings', 'knowable community', 'hegemony', and 'cultural materialism'. Through his publications like *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution and Communications* (1961), Williams established the frameworks for placing literary debates in larger contexts of discussions. His analysis of the idea of culture—for example, the forms of drama and fiction, the standardisation of language, the press, education and literacy – provided evidence that the changes and conflicts of a way of life are deeply implicated in its systems of learning. In the later 1960s and early 1970s, he produced revaluations of fiction, drama and television under the titles—*Modern Tragedy, Drama From Ibsen to Brecht, The country and the City,* and *Television.* He

'historicised' the texts, read them in their historical contexts, and discussed cultural institutions within a critical sociology of society. In the later part of 1970s, he turned towards rewriting Marxist literary and cultural theories. In works like *Marxism and Literature, Politics and Letters, Problems in Materialism and Culture, Culture,* he elaborated his mature theories of Cultural Materialism, by showing culture as a productive process. You should note that he coined the phrase 'cultural materialism' in the book *Marxism and Literature.*

Jonathan Dollimore (1948-)

Jonathan Dollimore is an English sociologist and theorist in the field of Renaissance Literature (mainly drama). Earlier, he was a Professor in the School of English and American Studies and is currently an associate member of the Centre for the Study of Sexual Dissidence, University of Sussex. He is also a Professor of English and Related Literature at the University of York. Dollimore is credited with making major interventions in debates on sexuality and desire, Renaissance literary culture, art and censorship, and cultural theory. After leaving school at an early age with no formal education to speak of, he worked in a car factory and as a journalist before going to university as a mature student. His first degree was in English with Philosophy. Both subjects have remained central to his range of interests which include Renaissance literature, especially drama; gender studies, especially homosexuality and bisexuality; the history of ideas, especially the philosophical preoccupation with decadence and death in western culture; the history of criticism— especially New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. His books include (with Alan Sinfield), *Radical Tragedy: Religion Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (1984), *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985), *Sexual Dissidence* (1991), *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (1998), *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (2001).

Dollimore in his *Radical Tragedy* states that the traditional interpretations of the Jacobean tragedies like Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*

and Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* have ignored how the plays undermine humanist assumptions because they focus on what fits the humanist framework. He (with Alan Sinfield) polemically announced in their introduction to *Political Shakespeare* that Cultural Materialism does not, like much established criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order, which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class.

Alan Sinfield (1941-)

Alan Sinfield is an English theorist in the fields of Shakespeare and sexuality, modern theatre, gender studies, queers theory (queer studies), post-1945 politics and cultural theory. A number of important books are placed in his credit. They include *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (1992), *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1994), *Gay and After: Gender, Culture and Consumption* (1998), *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (1999), *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (2004), *On Sexuality and Power* (2004), *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism* (2006) and so on.

Sinfield in his *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* shows how the patriarchal culture in a play like *Othelo* presents Desdemona as someone who is bound to obey her father and the role of obedient daughter should in the normal course of things lead her to follow his wishes in her marital choice. However, in the early modern period we also find an increased emphasis on the idea that marriage should be personally fulfilling. This 'contradiction in the ideology of marriage' – one of Sinfield's 'faultlines' – allows Desdemona to disregard her father's wishes and to marry a man who from the perspective of the social group to which she belongs is totally unsuitable. As a result, the social order

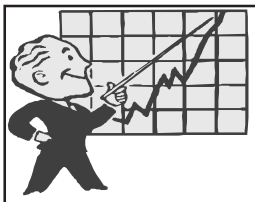
comes under immediate pressure. It is the faultline in question that creates what Sinfield calls 'dissident potential'. Dissidence is not so much a matter of individual agency but is first of all produced by the inner contradictions that characterise any social order. Since such 'faultlines' are to be found in all cultures, it is only natural that they should turn up in literary texts because literature offers a place where, contradictions and tensions can be addressed and worked through. With such views, Sinfield focussed on the cracks in the ideological facade that texts offer. Hence, Cultural Materialism reads even the most reactionary texts against the grain, offering readings of dissidence that allow us to hear the socially marginalised and expose the ideological machinery that is responsible for their marginalisation and exclusion.



LET US KNOW

Ideology:

For cultural materialists ideology becomes quite visible in institutions such as the university, the museum, the army, the school, the labour union, the church, and a whole range of organisations. And it becomes material the ways in which images and representations from the past are deployed in the service of contemporary ideology, for instance, the merchandising of the product called 'Shakespeare' (and other big sellers in the heritage industry) and in the use of, for instance, 'Shakespeare' in commercials. In *Faultlines* Sinfield shows how a reference to Shakespeare's **Globe Theatre**, evokes the continuity of British tradition, and is used by a manufacturer of defence equipment to promote itself and its wares. From the perspective of Cultural Materialism, contemporary culture, both in its institutionalised and in its popular and mass forms, is a battlefield where an omnipresent conservative ideology must constantly be challenged.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: How is Raymond Williams connected with CM?

Q 8: Mention the significance of the book *Political Shakespeare*?

5.4.3 Important Concepts in Cultural Materialism

The following are the important concepts in Cultural Materialism.

Ideology

Ideology is an important concept in Cultural Materialism. According to classical Marxism, it is a system of false beliefs founded on contradictions and inconsistencies that misrepresent social relationships. Louis Althusser, the noted Marxist theorist talked about "Ideological State Apparatuses" that include all institutions like educational systems, law, religion, art etc, and which represent and reproduce the myths or beliefs needed to maintain the existing mode of economic production of a society. Raymond Williams, on the other hand, places ideology in the context of changes comprising 'residual', 'dominant', and 'emergent' elements in culture. He was of the opinion that the dominant elements form the controlling ideology at any historical moment. While the residual elements of previously dominant ideologies still maintain some influence and new elements emerge in the form of new ideas and values to initiate change by challenging central beliefs and faiths. The point Williams raised is that the dominant values only 'misrepresent' by failing to acknowledge the complexity of social interaction, but simultaneously, marginal beliefs complete the ideological picture by accounting for historical change and cultural contradictions.



LET US KNOW

For Williams, as we have seen, the dominant culture is never more than one player in the

cultural field, even if it is by far the most powerful. There are always residual and emergent strains within a culture that offer alternatives to the hegemony. In other words, the dominant culture is always under pressure from alternative views and beliefs. Therefore, while cultural materialist analyses of literary texts bring to light how texts are instruments of a dominant socio-cultural order, they also demonstrate how the apparent coherence of that order is threatened from the inside, by inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide.

Politics

Cultural Materialists believe that literary representation of ideology is used to reinforce power and authority in the face of opposition. Hence, words like 'Consolidation', 'Subversion' and 'Containment' are key words in Cultural Materialism. In *Political Shakespeare,* Jonathan Dollimore opines that "the first refers, typically, to the ideological means whereby a dominant order seeks to perpetuate itself; the second to the subversion to that order, the third to the containment of ostensibly subversive pressures." (p 10) Subsequently, materialist critics have viewed political power as a shaky relationship between dominance and subversion. Any dominant order restricts and falsifies human experience and literary texts play a politically subversive role by exposing the contradictions and inconsistencies, which undermine domination.

Renaissance Drama

The study of Renaissance drama was heavily influenced by Cultural Materialism following which the interaction between politics and performance has been of serious interest in recent literary criticism. Perhaps the approach was first started by Jonathan Dollimore in his books *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (1984), and *Political Shakespeare* (1985). Dollimore portrayed the Jacobian playwrights as political activists who repeated by question

and subvert the ideological foundation of monarchical authority. In his interpretations of the Renaissance texts, Dollimore challenged essentialism— the view that human nature has inherent or universal qualities uniting readers and writers from one historical period to the next.

5.5 RECEPTION OF THESE THEORIES

Following New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, literary criticism increasingly began to see literature as an integral part of a much wider cultural context. Initially in the field of Renaissance Studies, but later on in literary studies in general, critics start from the assumption that literary texts are inevitably situated within the discourses that, according to Foucault, carry and maintain social power. The American New Historicists and the British Cultural Materialists read literary texts for their role in the circulation of power. In order to bring to light the political dimension of literary texts, new historicists and cultural materialists often read them in connection with non-literary texts and the dominant discourses of a given period. Cultural Studies shares its roots with Cultural Materialism, in seeing the whole field of contemporary culture as its object of study. Like New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, it is interested in the workings of power, and in the way, cultural institutions and organisations and the products of culture create subject positions for the members of a society.

There is no doubt about the fact that during 1990s, New Historicism provided many new directions to literary discussions that influenced the new field of Postcolonial studies. However, New Historicism is also open to serious critique. The tendency to tell similar historical tales of the expanding reach of power has opened New Historicism to criticism. Historians have objected that these literary critics read a few non-literary texts, juxtapose them with plays or novels, and think they are doing history. Besides, Feminist and other critics too have objected to the steamroller effect of New Historicism's view of power, and to how in new historicist criticism structures of power flattened and homogenised all subjects that lived within them so that differences in class, sex, and race completely disappeared from view.

Responding to such criticisms, subsequent new historicist studies had begun to consider such differences in its analyses of the way subjects are constructed. In the new historicist discussion of the 1990s and beyond, subjects are not simply seen as the products of the dominant ideology, but 'constructed' by one or more subcultures. Such a view immediately brings issues of sex and race into the foreground.

To talk about the reception of Cultural Materialism, it has been observed that the political bias of Cultural Materialism is its most controversial aspect. The objection is that the practitioners often choose those texts that validate their own position. Besides, their studies often lead to a narrow predictable reading of texts or to a discussion of contemporary politics which overshadows focus on texts and history altogether. Scholars who are called Materialist have been criticised for being both too materialist and not enough materialist.

Greenblatt's works, along with that of Louis Adrian Montrose, Stephen Mullaney, Jonathan Dollimore, Catherine Belsey, and numerous other literary critics, had ensured that English Renaissance studies and New Historicism have become inextricably linked. However, New Historicists work has also been highly influential in studies of other historical periods. especially ninesation-century American and British literature. Jerome McGann for example, though not influenced so directly by Foucault as are the members of the *Representations* group, has brought a New Historicist concern with social context to the criticism of British Romantic poetry. By the late 1990s, literary critics stopped identifying themselves as New Historicists, but the emphasis on context over text still prevailed in most of their theoretical analysis.



5.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, we have learnt that the 'constructedness' of culture and its annexation by literary studies are central to New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, the first being American in origin, and the second being

mainly British. Both the approaches share a focus on power and ideology and the view that writers challenge political power by exploring its representations and exposing its inconsistencies in representations. Both share the assumption that literature is completely integrated with political, social and economic forces. However, there are certain differences between the two. The British Marxist origin of the first link it to a tradition of oppositional politics, while the second is influenced more directly by Clifford Geertz's Anthropology, Michel Foucault's discussions of power relations, and Jacque Derrida's Deconstruction. The Marxist political background helps in explaining the cultural materialist belief in freedom for social change through literary texts and analysis. But, the two also differ in textual interpretation. Cultural Materialists focus on the subversion of dominant ideologies and institutions represented in literature, while the New Historicists emphasise containment in asserting that the dominant is necessarily defined by the subversion it controls. Besides, New Historicism too tends to remain within the problematics of representation. Nevertheless, Cultural Materialism moves from systems of representation to specific historical referents and their political effects.



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Web Resources:

http://english.jhu.edu/bios/jonathan-dollimore/index.html

5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: New Historicism began around 1980s… …according to Stephen Greenblatt "The New Historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature"… …the New Historicist critics decide on alternative reading practices… … as Louis Montrose states, they presuppose both 'the historicity of texts' and 'the textuality of history'.

Ans to Q 2: New Historicist not only pays attention to the discursive disputes in a particular text but also examines how a particular text is addressed to other texts… …it views the text as a dynamic interweaving of multiple strands from a culture that is itself an unstable field of contending forces… …New Historicism remains political while denying that any social world is stable and that artworks are separated from the power-struggles constituting social reality… …they want to emphasise the contingencies and fluidity of history in a given moment.

Ans to Q 3: History, such as the socio-economic circumstances of a specific literary text's creation, is not read to illuminate literature, nor is literature read to shed a direct light on history… …rather, the historical period in question is seen as a remote culture whose various discursive manifestations need detailed attention and need to be brought into contact with each other so that the power relations and the forces operating in that culture may be brought to light.

Ans to Q 4: Cultural Materialism refers to 20th-century attempts at applying the Marxist notion of materialism to the study of culture… … It was first used by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature… …*Dollimore and Sinfield in their book *Political Shakespeare,* stated that Cultural Materialism involves 'historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis'.

Ans to Q 5: Both the trends were engaged with the traditional study of Renaissance literature, in particular the works of Shakespeare… …both rejected the individual genius of the author and the autonomy of the literary work and see literary texts as absolutely inseparable from their historical context… …they do not see literature as a special category of transcendent, essentially ahistorical texts… …in their conviction, culture is a construction.

Ans to Q 6: Where New Historicists would be satisfied to bring to light hidden power relations in a cluster of Renaissance texts, Cultural Materialists seek to find instances of dissidence, subversion, and transgression that are relevant in contemporary political struggles.

Ans to Q 7: Raymond Williams was a literary critic, cultural theorist and political activist. … …he is well known for his pioneering contributions to Cultural Studies… …through his publications like *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution and Communications* (1961), Williams established the frameworks for placing literary debates in larger contexts of discussions… …in works like *Marxism and Literature, Politics and Letters, Problems in Materialism and Culture, Culture,* he elaborated his mature theories of Cultural Materialism.

Ans to Q 8: In the introduction to *Political Shakespeare* Alan Sinfield stated that Cultural Materialism does not, like much established criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact… …On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class.



5.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What is New Historicism? Discuss the scope of New Historicism as a theoretical trend that is engaged with the reception of 'history'.

Q 2: Why is the idea of 'history' so important in New Historicism? How does it reveal the growth of forms of power that affects the lives of the common subjects?

Q 3: Who are the major exponents of New Historicist criticism? Discuss with reference to some of the key texts of New Historicism.

Q 4: What, according to you, is Cultural Materialism? Illustrate with the discussions of the major Cultural materialist critics.

Q 5: "Cultural Materialism involves historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis." Discuss.

Q 6: Discuss the similarities and differenced between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism as theoretical approaches in terms of their views regarding the past.

*** ***** ***



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Web Resources:

http://english.jhu.edu/bios/jonathan-dollimore/index.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poststructuralism

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Propp

Name of the Paper: Course Code:

Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA)
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
City Office, Housefed Complex, Guwahati- 06

Learner's Feedback on Course

Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your opinions and comments so as to improve the quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking the number you feel most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page and send/mail the same to us at the address given below.

The Director, Centre for Internal Quality Assurance, KKHandiqui State Open University
Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati- 781006
(E-mail id: ciqa@kkhsou.in)

1. Approximately how many hours did you spend for studying the units in the course? | | | |
2. Please give your opinions (by √ mark) to the following items based on your reading of the block:

Sl. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I.	The SLMs of the course fulfil the learning objectives set out in the beginning of each unit					
II.	The units of the SLM could satisfy my academic needs and expectations					
III.	The Unit writers have excellent knowledge about the course contents					
IV.	Language and contents of the units were presented at a level which I could readily understand					
V.	Ample opportunity for participation in the activities provided in the units					
VI.	Used enough Illustrations (Diagrams, tables etc.) for conceptual clarity					
VII.	Quality of content is engaging, relevant, and up-to-date					
VIII.	The self check questions are very helpful					
IX.	The Possible/model questions and the answers to check my progress have benefited me a lot					

Additional Comments: *(Please feel free to provide your open comments)*

1. Which aspects of the SLM, according to you, worked well?

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2. What sort of changes/improvements do you feel KKHSOU could implement to improve the overall quality of the SLM?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this form.

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