

Course Rationale

theory *n.* late 16th century (denoting a mental scheme of something to be done): via late Latin from Greek *theōria* 'contemplation, speculation', from *theōros* 'spectator'.

During our six tutorials, we will be using this definition of theory, using theory to speculate and contemplate on literature.

When we talk about books in general, including books of short stories, novels and of poems, we can use the general term 'literature'. Today people who write about literature talk a lot about 'theory'. Readers have always debated what literature means and how we should understand it, but since the 19th century this has been classified into 'schools' such as 'Marxist theory', 'psychoanalytic theory' and 'feminist theory'. These 'schools' have lots of similarities but also some important differences.

The principal objective of this course is to introduce you to some of these theories and to the possibility of reading texts in very different ways, showing that these theories reveal different aspects of the same text so that we can 'speculate' and 'contemplate' on the act of reading and on the meaning it creates.

For example, our reading of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* would change depending on which literary theory we use: a Marxist reading would show us that George and Lenny are fighting against a capitalist system, but a feminist reading would present Curly's wife's role as a victim of her own gender.

Reading Harry Potter using Minority Discourse, it would explain that Voldemort is evil because he is marginalised as he is a mudblood. However, a reading of Harry Potter in the bildungsroman genre would show that Harry is growing up and 'coming of age', finding his true identity in his adult life.

Some quotes to get you thinking:

"The greater the ambiguity, the greater the pleasure."

– Milan Kundera, author

"If it is true that we need a degree of certainty to get by, it is also true that too much of the stuff can be lethal."

– Terry Eagleton, literary theorist and academic

"...the book creates meaning, the meaning creates life..."

– Roland Barthes, French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and Semiotician

A diagram to help you think about how we use literary theory; we can wear many different pairs of glasses to read a text:

