

Reading Stanley Fish on Milton or Reading Milton

An examination of the undergraduate course
in literary theory

Why use literary theory?

- ▶ Jessica Manuel of “Best Books”:

“help students see the endless possibilities of literary analysis”

- ▶ Charles Bressler: “there is no such thing as an ‘innocent’ reading of the text” (xiii)

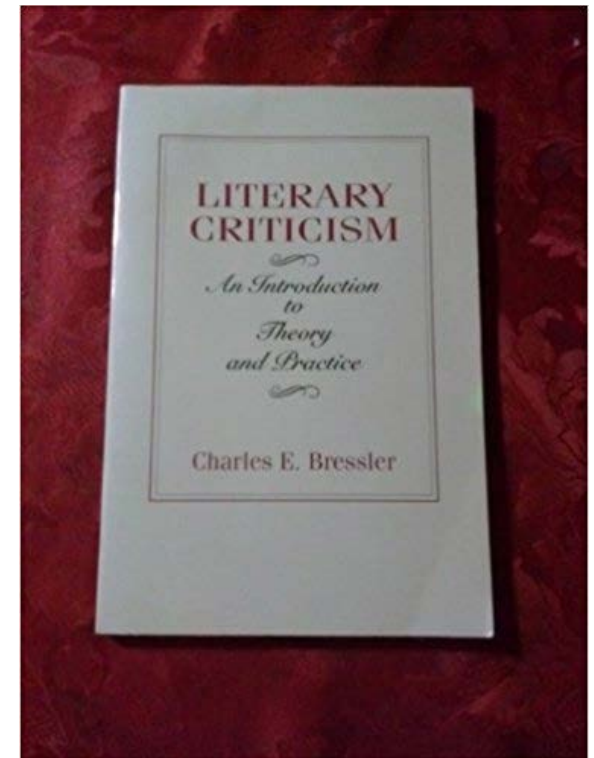
- ▶ Terry Eagleton: “we would not know what a ‘literary work’” is without some use of theory (x)

- ▶ Jonathan Culler” “theory is interdisciplinary. . . . analytical and speculative. . . . [critical and]. . . reflexive” (14–15)

ONU History

- ▶ Mid-90s: added to English dept curriculum
 - Theory already beyond its “heyday” nationally
 - Theory becoming a concretized element in many English departments

- ▶ 1998, slim volume of Bressler with basic theories
 - New Criticism
 - Reader Response
 - Psychoanalytic Theory
 - Structuralism



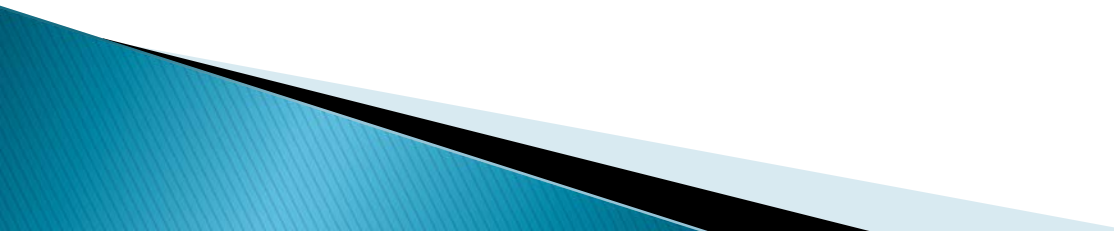
- ▶ Post-structuralist approaches
 - Deconstruction
 - Marxism
 - Feminism
 - New Historicism
 - Cultural Studies
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▶ 1999 *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*

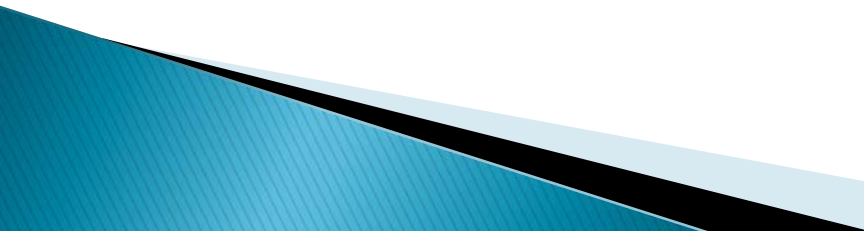
- Primary texts
- Plato to the present
- Choices
- Author's words
- Headnotes



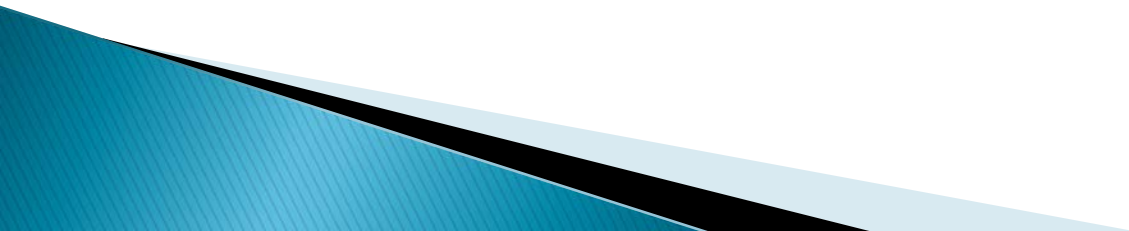
Today

- ▶ New edition of Norton
 - ▶ Latest edition of Bressler for overviews
 - ▶ Novel: J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*
 - ▶ Book of sample theoretical essays on novel
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Curriculum Approach

- ▶ Four-week philosophical foundation (essays from Norton)
 - ▶ Discussion of Coetzee's novel
 - ▶ Survey of main theories of the 20th century (Bressler as overview)
 - ▶ Sample essays to illustrate theory
 - ▶ Discussion of short literary texts (material for writing theoretical papers)
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Curriculum: out of date?



Aftermath of Theory Wars

- ▶ Theoretical approaches were exhausted
- ▶ Small theories were proliferating for special interest groups
 - Ecocriticism
 - Trauma studies
 - Disability studies
 - Displacement studies
 - Cognitive literary studies

Flipping the theory

- ▶ Using literature to examine life, not using theory to examine literature

- ▶ Eugene Thacker's "After Life: Swarms, demons, and the antinomies of immanence"

- Uses Dante's *Inferno*, Goethe's *Faust*, Ambrose Bierce's "The Damned Thing," and horror films to study "a philosophy of life. . . a biology of life. . . a theology of life" (192)


- ▶ Marco Caracciolo's "Cognitive Literary Studies and the Status of Interpretation: An Attempt at Conceptual Mapping"

- “Psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology may study the inference-making and model-building that contribute to linguistic understanding and discourse comprehension” but “these activities are not interpretation [of the literature]” (192)

Peter Barry's advice

- ▶ “You do have to decide which you most want to spend your time studying, great literature or the cognitive processes of the human mind” (317)—and, I would add, any other pet projects any of us might be interested in

A good approach

- ▶ Foreground the literature
 - ▶ Stick to basic schools of thought (20th century)
 - ▶ Work on a critical thinking hierarchy, such as Bloom's taxonomy (recall, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation)
 - ▶ Introduce special interest topics (finally)
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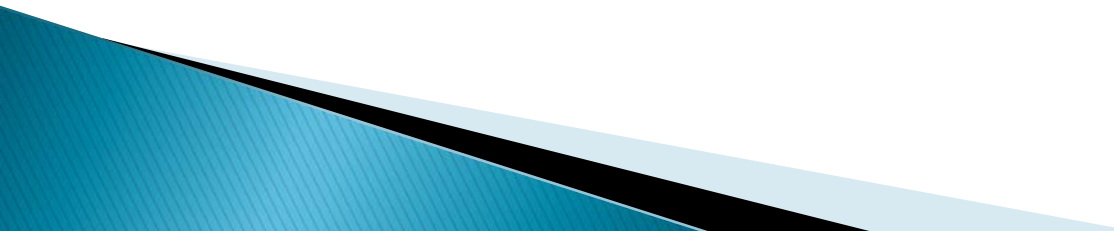
Lois Tyson's words

- ▶ “Literary criticism. . . tries to explain the literary work to us: its production, its meaning, its design, its beauty. . . . Critical theory tries to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of criticism rest” (6)

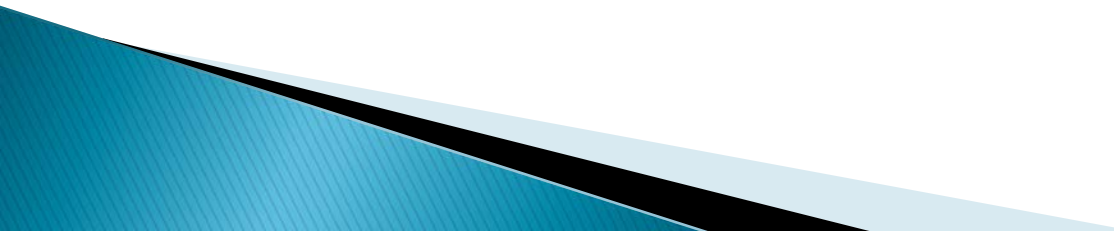
Nigel Nicholson's classical approach

- ▶ “Studying theory is an exercise in honesty. . . . [it] make[s] students more reflective about their language work. . . . [it] foster[s] many of the skills and habits of mind central to a liberal arts education and the ability to think across disciplines” (166–7)

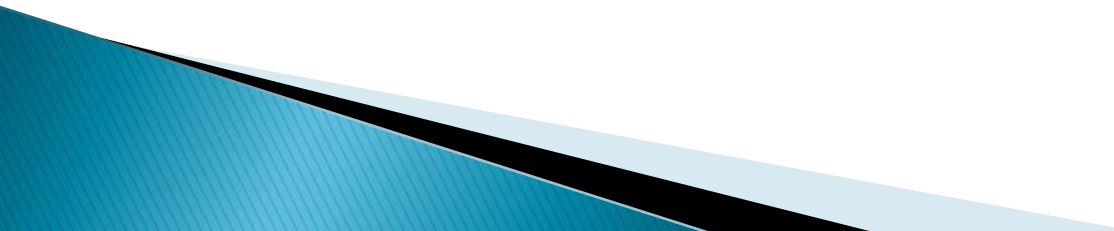
Practical approach

- ▶ Begin with the text: read, respond, discuss, question
 - ▶ From “I liked it” or “It was awful” to “why?”
 - ▶ Questions of style, language, characters, story lines: from reader response to new critical questions to close reading
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More “why” questions

- ▶ Why do we see so much power in the man with the gun?
 - ▶ Why does the woman cower in the darkness?
 - ▶ Why is this character rejected by others?
 - ▶ Why is “cowardly” used to describe this person?
 - ▶ Why does this author use so many adverbs?
 - ▶ Why is there no dialogue?
 - ▶ Why is there only dialogue?
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The answers

- ▶ Psychoanalytic criticism
 - ▶ Feminism
 - ▶ Cultural Studies
 - ▶ Narratology
 - ▶ Structuralism
 - ▶ Deconstruction
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The last word—from Nicholson

- ▶ “[S]tudents find the questions that theory asks of them [to be] tremendously exciting—big questions” (167)

. . . therefore, we continue to teach literary theory in the undergraduate classroom

Works Cited

- ▶ Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 1995. 3rd edition. Manchester UP, 2009.
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