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 “heydey” 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
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
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)
Curriculum: out of date?
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)
“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
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?
The answers

- Psychoanalytic criticism
- Feminism
- Cultural Studies
- Narratology
- Structuralism
- Deconstruction
“[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


