**Text and World-Centred Theories**

**English & Literature Extension**

**IA2 – Complex Transformation & Defence**

Contents page

Text-centred theories

New criticism 1

Structuralism 2-4

Deconstruction 5

World-centred theories

Marxist criticism 6-7

Feminist criticism 8-11

Psychoanalytic criticism 12-14

**NEW CRITICISM**

New Criticism requires a reader to “carefully examine, or ‘closely read,’ all the evidence provided by the language of the text itself: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot, and so forth, which, because they form, or shape, the literary work are called its *formal elements****.”*** (Tyson, 2006, 137)

New Criticism highlights the “importance of textual evidence—the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations” (Tyson, 2006, 135)

“New Critics believed their interpretations were based solely on the context

created by the text and the language provided by the text, they called their

critical practice *intrinsic criticism*, to denote that New Criticism stayed within

the confines of the text itself.” (Tyson, 2006, 148)

“By staying within the [text], New Critics believed they allowed the literary work itself to provide the context within which we interpret and evaluate it.” (Tyson, 2006, 147)

“Knowing an author’s intention, therefore, tells us nothing about the text

itself, which is why New Critics coined the term *intentional fallacy* to refer to the

mistaken belief that the author’s intention is the same as the text’s meaning.” (Tyson, 2006, 136)

“The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.” (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, 468)

Reference list:

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. 2nd ed. Taylor and Francis.

Wimsatt, W.K. & Beardsley, M.C. (1946). The Intentional Fallacy. *The Sewanee Review*, 54.3. 468-488.

**STRUCTURALISM**

Structural linguistics was pioneered by **Ferdinand de Saussure**, whose work became popularized during the 1950s.

As Saussure himself says of all the elements that make up a linguistic system: ‘Their most precise characteristic is being what the others are not’ (Saussure, 1966, 117)

A linguistic sign – a word – is both form and meaning. Saussure calls the form – the word as it is spoken or written – the *signifier* and the meaning the *signified*. (Bertens, 2008, 45)

“The idea that signifiers, or linguistic sound-images, do not refer to things in

the world but to concepts in our mind is crucial for structuralism.” (Tyson, 2006, 214)

According to structuralism, the human mind perceives difference most

readily in terms of opposites, which structuralists call *binary oppositions*: two

ideas, directly opposed, each of which we understand by means of its opposition (Tyson, 2006, 213)

**Northrup Frye** attempted to summarise all literary genres in his *theory of myths.* (Tyson, 2006, 221).

The *mythos of summer* is associated with the romance genre. Frye describes the romance genre as the “nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream” and that “the essential element of plot in romance is adventure” (Frye, 1957, 186).

The *mythos of winter* is associated with the double genre of irony and satire. Tyson summarises this genre as “the real world seen through a tragic lens, a world in which protagonists are defeated by the puzzling complexities of life. They may try to be heroic, but they never achieve heroic stature. They may dream of happiness, but they never attain it.” (Tyson, 2006, 221)

The *mythos of autumn* relates to tragedy. Frye believes that, “In full tragedy the main characters are emancipated from dream, an emancipation which is at the same time a restriction, because the order of nature is present. However thickly strewn a tragedy may be with ghosts, portents, witches, or oracles, we know that the tragic hero cannot simply rub a lamp and summon a genie to get him out of his trouble.” (Frye, 1957, 206-207)

The *mythos of spring* is associated with comedy. Frye states that “Comedy usually moves toward a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is "this should be," which sounds like a moral judgement. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense, but social.” (Frye, 1957, 167)

**Gerard Genette** established his type of structuralism in his study, *Narrative Discourse*, which is often called *narratology*.

It is “exemplary in its focus on the structure of narration, the way stories – taken in its widest sense – are told.” (Bertens, 2008, 55).

Genette begins by differentiating among three levels of narrative that generally have been included under the umbrella of the term *narrative*: story, narrative, and narration.

*Story* consists of the succession of events being narrated.

*Narrative* refers to the actual words on the page, the discourse, the text itself, from which the reader constructs both story and narration.

*Narration* refers to the act of telling the story to some audience and thereby producing the narrative.

For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick describes his summer in New York to some audience (narration). In doing so, he presents a verbal discourse, which we see as the words on the page (narrative). And that discourse represents the events in which Nick appears as a character (story).

 And he observes that story, narrative, and narration interact by

means of three qualities, which he calls tense, mood, and voice.

1. *Tense* is the arrangement of events in the narrative with respect to time.
2. *Mood* is the atmosphere of the narrative created by distance and perspective.

a. *Distance* is created when the narrator is one of the characters in the narrative, a “go-between” through whose consciousness the story is filtered. The more intrusive the narrator, the greater the distance between narration and story.

1. 3. *Voice* refers to the voice of the narrator. (Tyson, 2006, 228-229)

Reference list:

Bertens, H. (2008). *Literary Theory: the basics*. 2nd ed. Taylor and Francis.

Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism*. 15th ed. Princeton University Press.

Saussure, F.D. (1966) *Course in General Linguistics*. (W. Baskin trans.) McGraw-Hill, (Original work published 1916).

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. 2nd ed. Taylor and Francis.

Wimsatt, W.K. & Beardsley, M.C. (1946). The Intentional Fallacy. *The Sewanee Review*, 54.3. 468-488.

 **DECONSTRUCTION**

The theory of deconstruction was inaugurated by **Jacques Derrida** in the late 1960s.

Deconstructive criticism “can improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideologies of which we are unaware because they are “built into” our language.” (Tyson, 2006, 249)

“Derrida borrowed and transformed structuralism’s idea that we tend to conceptualize our experience in terms of polar opposites, called *binary oppositions.*” (Tyson, 2006, 254)

Derrida believes that “in a language, in a *system* of language, there are only differences.” (Derrida, 1968, 11)

More importantly, Derrida raises awareness that if all language is made up of differences, “a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language, there are only differences *without positive terms*” (Derrida, 1968, 11)

“By finding the binary oppositions at work in a cultural production (such as a novel, a film, a conversation, a classroom, or a courtroom trial), and by identifying which member of the opposition is privileged, one can discover something about the ideology

promoted by that production.” (Tyson, 2006, 254)

Reference list:

Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of Philosophy* (A. Bass trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1973)

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. 2nd ed. Taylor and Francis.

**MARXIST/ECONOMIC DETERMINIST CRITICISM**

“The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force.” (Marx & Engels, 2001, 39)

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” (Marx, 1859, 2)

“If a theory does not foreground the economic realities of human culture, then it misunderstands human culture. For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities” (Tyson, 2006, 53)

“From a Marxist perspective, the role of ideology in maintaining those in power is

so important” (Tyson, 2006, 59)

“Gramsci’s explanation of the power of ideology has the merit of allowing us to resist what he calls the *hegemony* – the domination of a set of ruling beliefs and values through ‘consent’ rather than through ‘coercive power’.” (Bertens, 2008, 68)

**“**In the United Kingdom, the important Marxist critic Raymond Williams (1921–88) emphasized this aspect of Gramsci’s thought. For Williams ‘hegemony is not singular . . . its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended . . . they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified’” (Bertens, 2008. 69)

“*Classism*, for example, is an ideology that equates one’s value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs: the higher one’s social class, the better one is assumed to be because quality is “in the blood”. From a classist perspective, people at the top of the social scale are naturally superior to those below them: those at the top are more intelligent, more responsible, more trustworthy, more ethical, and so on. People at the bottom of the social scale, it follows, are naturally shiftless, lazy, and irresponsible.” (Tyson, 2006, 59)

“*Rugged individualism*, which, as we have seen, is a cornerstone of the American dream, is an ideology that romanticizes the individual who strikes out alone in pursuit of a goal not easily achieved, a goal that often involves risk and one that

most people would not readily undertake.” (Tyson, 2006, 60)

“Marxist thinkers consider rugged individualism an oppressive ideology because it puts self-interest above the needs—and even above the survival—of other people.” (Tyson, 2006, 60)

Reference list:

Marx, K. (1859). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. S.W. Ryazanskaya (trans.). Progress Publishers, Moscow.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (2001) The Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas. In M.G. Durham & D.M. Keller (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies – Keyworks.* (pp. 39-43). Blackwell Publishers.

**FEMINIST CRITICISM**

“Broadly defined, feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other

cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social,

and psychological oppression of women.” (Tyson, 2006, 83)

“In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is *other:* she is objectified

and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values,

defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have.” (Tyson, 2006, 92)

**Hélène Cixous** (b. 1938) is an influential French writer and literary critic who used binary oppositions to illustrate the inherent inequality between men and women.

In her essay, **‘Sorties’** (1975), she states:

“Thought has always worked by . . . dual, hierarchized oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Nature/History, Nature/Art, Nature/Mind, Passion/Action. […] In philosophy woman is always on the side of passivity.” (Cixous, 1975, 264)

“French materialist feminism examines the patriarchal traditions and institutions

that control the material (physical) and economic conditions by which

society oppresses women” (Tyson, 2006, 96)

**Simone de Beauvoir** lay the theoretical foundations for materialist feminism.

“She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” (Beauvoir, 1949, 3)

“The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other.” (Beauvoir, 1949, 3)

“If woman seems to be the inessential [being] which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change” (Beauvoir, 1949, 4)

“Women lack a concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit. . . . They have no [collective recorded] past . . . no religion of their own. . . . They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands— more firmly than they are to other women.” (Beauvoir, 1949, 5)

“A little-known feminist of the seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre, put it this way: ‘All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit.’” (Beauvoir, 1949, 6)

“Now, what peculiarly signalises the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilise her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and for ever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign.” (Beauvoir, 1949, 11-12)

“How can a human being in woman’s situation attain fulfilment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman’s liberty and how can they be overcome?” (Beauvoir, 1949, 12)

**Collette Guillaumin** is another notable materialist feminist.

“There we are! A woman is never anything but a woman, an interchangeable object with no other characteristic than her femininity, whose fundamental characteristic is belonging to the class of women.” (Guillaumin, 1996, 178)

“Women are also oppressed by what Guillaumin calls “direct physical appropriation,” by which she means “the reduction of women to the state of material objects” (Guillaumin, 1996, 178)

“Called ‘slavery’ and ‘serfdom’ (in the feudal economy), this type of relation can be designated by the term *sexage* in the case of the modern domestic economy when it concerns the relations between sex classes.” (Guillaumin, 1996, 181)

Sexage occurs, she believes, in four main forms: (1) the appropriation of women’s time, (2) the appropriation of the products of women’s bodies, (3) women’s sexual obligation, and (4) women’s obligation to care for whichever members of the family can’t care for themselves as well as for healthy male family members. (Guillaumin, 1996, 181)

In contrast to materialist feminism, French feminist psychoanalytic theory is

interested in patriarchy’s influence on women’s psychological experience and

creativity. (Tyson, 2006, 99)

**Luce Irigaray** uses, and critiques, Freudian psychological theory to examine feminism.

“In our social order, women are ‘products’ used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, ‘commodities.’ How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in general?” (Irigaray, 1985, 84)

“Thus, with regard to ‘the development of a normal woman,’ we learn, through Freud, that there is and can be only one single motivating factor behind it: ‘penis envy,’ that the desire to appropriate for oneself the genital organ that has a cultural monopoly on value. Since women don't have it, they can only covet the one men have, and, since they cannot it, they can only seek to find equivalents for it.” (Irigaray, 1985, 86-87)

“The circulation of women among men is what establishes the operations ofsociety, at least of patriarchal society.” (Irigaray, 1985, 184)

“Women, stop trying. You have been taught that you were property, private or public, belonging to one man or all. To family, tribe, State, even a Republic. That therein lay your pleasure.” (Irigaray, 1985, 203)

“But, curiously enough, your nature has always been defined by men, and men alone. Your eternal instructors, in social science, religion, or sex. Your moral or immoral teachers. They are the ones who have taught you your needs or desires. You haven't yet had a word to say on the subject.” (Irigaray, 1985, 203)

Reference list:

Beauvoir, Simone de. “Introduction.” *The Second Sex*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1949. 6–20.

Cixous, Helene. “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays.” Rpt. in *The Feminist*

*Reader.* 2nd ed. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell,

1997. 91–103.

Guillaumin, Colette. “The Practice of Power and Belief in Nature.” *Sex in Question:*

*French Materialist Feminism*. Ed. Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins. London: Taylor

& Francis, 1996. 72–108.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 1985.

**PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM**

**“**It starts with Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the literary work as a symptom of the artist, where the relationship between author and text is analogous to dreamers and their ‘text’ […] modified by post-Freudians in a psychoanalytic reader-response criticism where the reader’s transactive relation to the text is foregrounded […] and is contested by Carl Jung’s ‘archetypal’ criticism in which, *contra* Freud, the literary work is not a focus for the writer’s or reader’s personal psychology but a representation of the relationship between the personal and the collective unconscious, the images, myths, symbols, ‘archetypes’ of past cultures.” (Seldon, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005, 153)

“The unconscious can for instance hide a repressed desire behind an image that would seem to be harmless – a trick that Freud called *displacement* – or it can project a whole cluster of desires onto an image in a manoeuvre that Freud called *condensation*: a dream figure can for instance combine characteristics of a number of people we know.” (Bertens, 2008, 125)

“To the oldest of these mental provinces or departments we give the name of id. It contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is fixed in the constitution—above all, therefore, the instincts originating in the somatic organization, which find their first mental expression there in forms unknown to us” (Freud, 1940, 27)

“The principal characteristics of the ego are these. In consequence of the relation which was already established between sensory perception and muscular action, the ego is in control of voluntary movement. It has the task of self-preservation.” (Freud, 1940, 29)

“The super-ego’s chief function remains the limitation of satisfactions” (Freud, 1940, 30)

“The weakened ego of the patient [must combine] the instinctual claims of the id and the moral claims of the super-ego.” (Freud, 1940, 50)

“Western thought has for a long time assumed the necessity of a unified ‘subject’. To *know* anything presupposes a unified consciousness which does the knowing.” (Seldon, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005, 156)

“Indeed, Lacan claims that the Mirror Stage initiates what he calls the *Imaginary*

*Order*, by which he means the world of images. This is not the world of the

imagination, but a world of perception.” (Tyson, 2006, 28)

“Thus, the Symbolic Order, or the world known through language, ushers in the world of lack.” (Tyson, 2006, 29)

“Thus, in entering the Symbolic Order—the world of language—we’re entering a world of loss and lack. We’ve exited the Imaginary Order, the world in which we had the illusion of fulfillment and control. We now inhabit a world in which others have needs, desires, and fears that limit the ways in which and the extent to which we can attend to our own needs, desires, and fears.” (Tyson, 2006, 30)

“With the transition from the ‘Imaginary’ to the ‘Symbolic’, in which we submit to language and reason and accept ‘reality’ as it is, we lose that feeling of wholeness, of undifferentiated being, that will forever haunt us.” (Bertens, 2008, 127)

“Neither the imaginary nor the symbolic can fully comprehend the Real, which remains out there somewhere, but beyond reach because beyond the subject and beyond representation.” (Seldon, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005, 158)

“Let’s look briefly at two literary examples. First, I’m sure many of you have read

the frequently anthologized story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman entitled “The

Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). In what way might we say that the story’s unnamed

narrator spends more and more time in the Imaginary Order until she, in effect,

lives there entirely? How is her recourse to the Imaginary Order a rejection of

the Symbolic Order, which is evidently embodied in her husband and brother?

How might the wallpaper be seen as a representation of the Lacanian Real? How

do the narrator’s encounters with the wallpaper illustrate the trauma of the Real?” (Tyson, 2006, 33)

“*Female imagery* can include caves, rooms, walled-in gardens, cups, or enclosures and containers of any kind. If the image can be a stand-in for the womb, then it might be functioning as female imagery.” (Tyson, 2006, 20)

Reference list:
Bertens, H. (2008). *Literary Theory: the basics*. 2nd ed. Taylor and Francis.

Freud, S. (1940). “An outline of psycho-analysis”. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis.* 21. Pp. 27-84.

Seldon, R., Widdowson, P. & Brooker, P. (2005). *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory.* (5th ed). Pearson Education Limited.

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. 2nd ed. Taylor and Francis.