

## Issues in Teaching Literary Theories and Practical Approaches

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### ملخص:

تهدف هذه المقالة ، - التي هي في الواقع نسخة قصيرة من عمل بحثي تم تقديمه في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية خلال يوم دراسي بعنوان "قضايا في تدريس النظريات النقدية إلى طلاب الماجستير" - إلى تلبية احتياجات الطلاب والأساتذة jamel الذين يهتمون بالأدب والنظريات النقدية، وهي تركز بشكل خاص على تعقيدات وصعوبات النظريات الأدبية المعاصرة مع ندرة المراجع ذات الجودة العالية في هذا المجال. إنها محاولة لتزويد المتعلم بالتوجيهات المناسبة بشأن قراءة وتقييم القضايا المعقدة، بدلاً من تعلم مجموعة ثابتة من "isms". انطلاقاً من الفرضية القاضية بأن النظرية النقدية الحديثة تتطلب مجالات واسعة من المعرفة والمنهجيات. وإذا كان هذا البحث يميل إلى إلقاء الضوء على المشكلات الرئيسية التي يواجهها طلابنا في الفصل الدراسي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النقد ، النظرية ، القضايا ، الأدب ، المدارس ، المناهج ، الممارسة

**Abstract**

This article, which is in fact a short version of a research work which was presented at the Department of English during the study day entitled “Issues in Teaching Critical Theories to Master Students”, aims to meet the needs of both students and teachers who strongly concerned with literature and critical theories. This article, in particular, puts much focus on the complexities and difficulties of contemporary literary theories in the dearth of high quality references in this domain. It is an attempt to provide the target learner with the adequate guidance on reading and assessing critical issues, rather than learning a fixed set of ‘isms’. Starting from the premise that modern critical theory requires huge areas of knowledge and methodologies, this present article tends to shed light on the main problems our students encounter in their classroom.

**Key words:** criticism, theory, issues, literature, schools, approaches, practice

## Introduction

The aim of this research work is not ‘Theory’ (with a capital T) on its own. It, rather, emphasizes theory in practice i.e. putting theories to work as sets of tools to explore and interpret all types of literary works. We are, in fact, much concerned with **theorising** (focus is put on the progressive principle) as an experimental process. Much emphasis is put on relating varieties of critical theory to varieties of practical activity, and on developing models that really work. Throughout our humble experience we have witnessed that the majority of our colleagues as well as our students are content with merely introducing *schools of literary criticism* (feminism, structuralism, Marxism, etc.). We should confess that our contention is simply of presenting a survey of different critical schools; and much of what is taught under the name of literary theory in our classrooms is anything but theory.

## Statement of the Problem

The majority of the teachers, thus, refer to the taxonomical survey of theory framed in different lessons or units on Saussurean Linguistics, structuralism, New Criticism, Deconstruction, Reader response, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism, *etc.* By the same token teachers persist on calling their students’ attention that language, meaning, and the self are socially constructed, that meaning is

beyond the surface level of the text, that discourse is ideological, that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," (Derrida 158), that the author is dead (Barthes 142). The ideas of literary theory, in short, are treated as accomplished facts. Nevertheless, it should be put clearly that teaching of literary theory as a set of facts is not the teaching of it as theory. Again to meet the aim of this research work, this is all about identifying "**Theoretical Positions**", dynamising and even spurring them as practical approaches.

### Theory in Practice: a Working Model to Play With

The diagram bellow shows a model which will help frame the various theoretical positions and practical approaches. It is a simplified version based on M.H. Abrams's influential essay "Orientation of Critical Theories" in the *Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). (qtd. in Pope 131) Abrams opines that **critical positions** can be categorized in so far as they focus one of four aspects of the literary-critical processes: **the work, the author, the reader, the universe**. Mindful all these four aspects are but **processes**. In other words, any **text** or other human **artefact** may be understood as a *product* or succession of *products* (Abrams's "work") which is the result of a number of other processes. These processes include three basic key terms: *producers* (e.g. authors, artists, publishers – Abrams's "author"); receivers (e.g. readers, audiences, and viewers-

Abrams' "reader"); and *relations to the rest of the world* (i.e. everyone and everything else to which the work is regarded to refer or relate-Abrams's "universe").

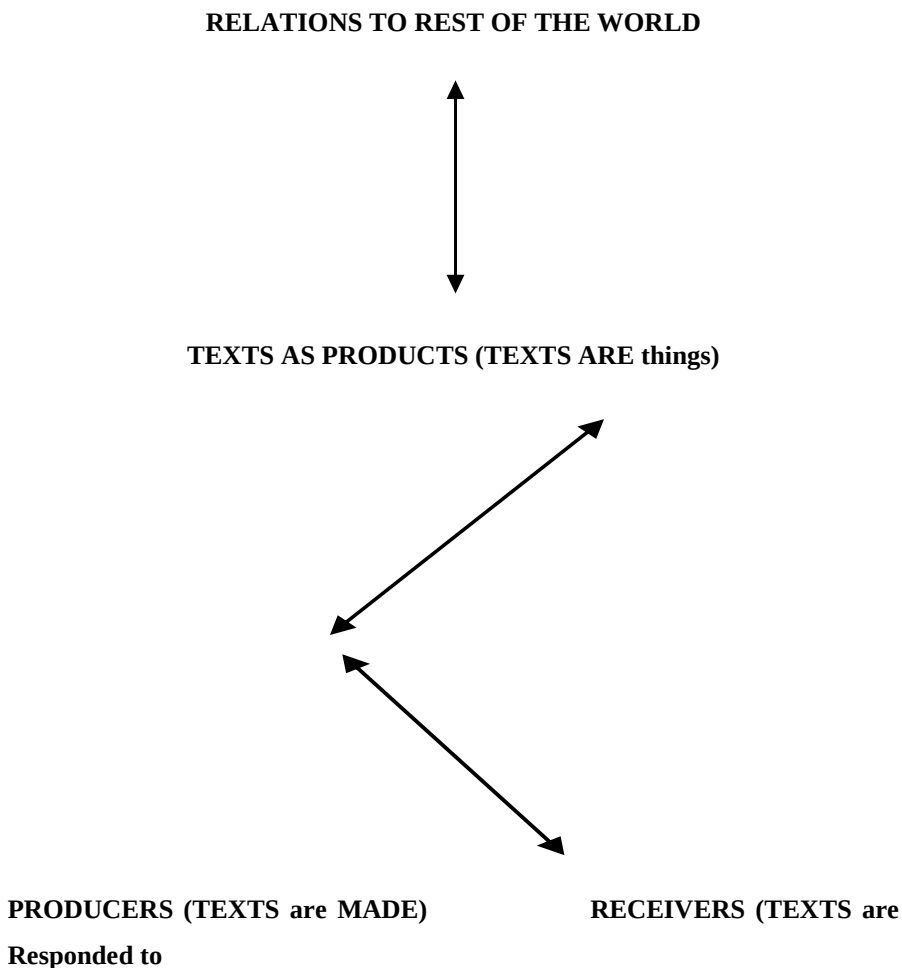


**Figure 1. A working model of the text as products and processes**

## Some Basic Theoretical and Practical Questions to Put to Any Text

Strange enough, in thinking about this research paper I have come across a myriad of related complex issues that some scholars legitimately keep asking themselves: *Texts as products*: In what manuscript, printed, film or otherwise recorded versions has this text existed? *Reproduction and Reception*: Who has been involved in making and responding to this text at various moments? *Relations to the rest of the world*: What are the various frames of reference and contexts (political, religious, social, etc...) within which this text has been realised historically? What “world-views” does it represent?

## The Objectives of the Research Work

However, our primordial concern from this research work is not to identify what is epistemologically true or identifiable but rather the obstacles that face teachers in teaching literary criticism to LMD students and overcome all the challenges of the different “isms.” This research hovers much on the humble teaching experience I had acquired within my students. They really inspired me while we were tackling challenges in their graduate research works, or dissecting lectures related to literary criticism. I had to keep learning how to present

lectures on critical literary theories in a way that has immediate practical value and honors their ambition for their work.

Increasingly, our students tend to be good at analyzing and gifted with an intuitive sense of interpreting different works of fiction. They discover that as soon as they master the routinely learned skills, their literary analysis is honed to perfection. Unfortunately, their expectations are doomed to failure and their output dies at their hand. Luckily, most of our students are stubbornly persistent, and they are also inquisitive, unafraid to question formulas.

The researcher came across a variety of bewildered questions that my students keep probing: Why can't we apply this particular approach to analyze this work? Why should we follow this method not the other? If meanings are ultimately "deferred" to evoke Derrida's notion of deconstruction, how can we then encounter a meaning of a literary work, since meaning is simply a ceaseless play of differences between those terms which are present and those which are absent. (Pope 178) Why should we burden ourselves to understand things by understanding what they are not? If Meaning is discovered through the reader's reaction to what they have read, so why do authors annoy themselves by writing? Why some writers violated the rules of writing such as Chekhov, Faulkner, Joyce,

Woolf, Pinter and Albee to name but few; and got away with it and demand to know why the same rules didn't govern every situation. Unfortunately, sometimes we, the teachers, do not have the wherewithal to answer all these questions by virtue of many reasons.

The students' predicament is akin to that of medical students who dissect a corpse so they can label bones and muscles and tendons and identify where and how they connect, and yet this doesn't tell them very much about how to examine a living person and diagnose his or her symptoms correctly. So, the researcher found it less motivating simply to prescribe rules, conventions, or models for interpreting works of literature. There must be a kind of dynamism and harmony in the applied literary critical approach and the elements of the target work of fiction.

What matters most for our students is to cultivate the attitudes of a creative critical reflection. It is only when we step in the authors' imagination, feeling and intelligence that the imaginative act of work of art is complete. There must be interplay between feelings and intelligence i.e. "idea-welded-to emotion" or what Flannery O'Conner calls "experienced meaning". (O'Conner 96) Aristotle suggested that fiction generates works primarily through the senses. He said, "Nothing exists in the intellect that was not first in the

senses.” (qdt. in Leibniz 29). Though literary criticism and interpretation of works of art is often intuitive, opportunistic and spontaneous, it does not follow that its methods are irreducibly mysterious. As Thiebaud has suggested, we can afford **to be concrete** in ways that embody **principles** and to **be playful** in the way that **art** is. (qtd. in Garchik) Because we are interested in generating “original” interpretation— a second artistic creation some scholars would call it— we cannot simply copy the methods of a specific work of art/fiction but have to seek principles that account for why a craft choice works in this particular context.

### **Introducing Literary Theories to the Literature Class**

Introducing literary theory to the literature class is quiet necessary since the more students grow in their capacity to understand theory, to think more broadly and more deeply about human experience and the world of ideas, the more they “will be capable of appreciating the rich density, the varied texture and shades of meaning, available in literary works” (Tyson 4). Literary theories enable the students to address ways of looking at literature beyond the typical plot-theme character-setting studies. Literary theory is a demand for proof and further evidence. Its advantage is that it introduces students into the rough-and-tumble of critical argument,