

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING TWENTIETH CENTURY ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE

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**Abstract.** *This paper provides an overview of theoretical texts and critical essays which enable students to contextualize twentieth century anglophone literature and understand the key concepts, preoccupations and motifs of this literary period. Students are introduced to some seminal works in the field of literary theory and cultural studies, such as those written by Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire or Terry Eagleton. In addition, essays written by Seamus Heaney and Adrienne Rich are included in the syllabus, with a view to representing these poets' explicit poetics and making their poetry more accessible to students. The paper represents briefly each of these texts, while also discussing how they may be applied to the study of literature.*

**Key words:** *ideological criticism, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, authors' poetics*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The course in Twentieth Century Anglophone Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, focuses on literary works written between 1950 and 2000, and comprises a number of movements in drama, fiction and poetry which have been prominent in that period. In comparison to Modernism, as the dominant literary movement of the early decades of the twentieth century, the literature written after the Second World War is more overtly political, addressing the urgent historical and social issues pertaining to the upheavals in the capitalist class society, as well as those related to the process of decolonization. On the other hand, some of the Modernists' preoccupations with subjectivity and the intricacies of the individual psyche have been taken over and further explored by their successors in the post-war period.

In order to elucidate these complex literary concerns, several theoretical works and critical essays have also been included in the course. Their purpose is to enable students to contextualize twentieth century literature and understand the key concepts and motifs of

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the literary works they encounter. Students are introduced to some seminal texts written by Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Frantz Fanon, Aime Césaire and Terry Eagleton. In addition, essays written by Seamus Heaney and Adrienne Rich are included in the syllabus, with a view to representing these poets' explicit poetics and making their poetry more accessible to students. In the following sections of the paper, each of these texts will be briefly represented. The texts are grouped based on the theoretical movements to which they belong.

## 2. STRUCTURALISM AND IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

As a movement in humanities and social sciences, structuralism developed in early 20<sup>th</sup> century France with the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. The two representative authors whose writing we cover in the course on Twentieth Century Anglophone Literature, in order to highlight the main preoccupations and thoughts of this literary period, are Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes. Namely, the course syllabus includes Althusser's text on Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses as well as two short texts ("Myth is depoliticized speech" and "Toys") from Barthes' study *Mythologies* (1957).

Althusser's text discusses the notions of an individual and a subject. According to him, the term "individual" would denote a human being in a natural state, i.e., someone who is untouched and unaffected by ideology. In contrast to that, the term "subject" refers to an ideologically conditioned human being, which is how he defines the majority of humanity. When discussing the power of ideology, Althusser points to its ability to create a false consciousness of one's position and value in society. Furthermore, ideology is capable of instilling a subject with a false sense of freedom and independence within society. This leads to the conclusion that one of the basic principles through which ideology operates is misrecognition. In a way, ideology creates a mirror which offers a distorted reflection or an ideological projection of its subjects. Althusser also explains the effect of ideology by referring to the linguistic ambiguity of the word "subject": "In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission" (Althusser 2014, 269).

In other words, due to the false sense of freedom and autonomy which ideology produces, one is more susceptible to willingly accept a subjected position within society. According to Althusser, ideology operates and is ingrained through the so-called Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), social and cultural constructs such as the educational and political systems, health service, media, language, etc. They facilitate the subjects' internalisation of ideology without the necessity of external coercion. However, Althusser also accounts for the existence of those who would refuse to conform to ideological commandments and introduces the term Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) (*ibid.*, 132). The RSAs comprise forces such as police, army or the penal system – in other words, forms of open repression which the state invokes against the "bad subjects", i.e., those on whom the subtler means of ideological control did not work.

In his study *Mythologies*, Barthes likewise expands upon the notion of ideology by referring to it as myth. In the chapter of the book titled "Myth Today" he argues that myth, defined in this manner, is everpresent in popular culture and that it "operates the inversion of *anti-physis* into *pseudo-physis*" (Barthes 1991, 142). In other words, ideology is capable of presenting that which is not natural, and has been fabricated (such as the capitalist system, for

instance) as something pseudo-natural by omitting the historical factor. By disregarding the historical reality, Barthes argues, ideology obfuscates the human agency in the creation and development of any such system. Consequently, it also excludes the awareness of the possibility that man can change or destroy what he himself has created. By operating in such a way, myth depoliticizes and purifies the dominant cultural signs. As an illustration of this, Barthes offers the example of a photograph representing a black soldier saluting the French flag with no additional context provided. Through this example, he wants to show how a viewer of this photograph would be able to accept the fact of French imperialism as something natural and given, without thinking of the injustice of the imperial rule, or experiencing any sense of contradiction (ibid., 142–143).

Furthermore, Barthes discusses the presence of ideology in children's formative years by providing an analysis of toys and the ideological significance they carry. Namely, he points out that the majority of toys represent shrunken versions of objects from the world of adults. One can buy toy guns, soldiers, vehicles, houses, kitchens and appliances, anything that children would use or own as adults in the future. The purpose of such toys is to prepare the children for their future roles in society and perpetuate the dominant ideology by training the subjects from very early on. Additionally, the toys serve the capitalist ideology by perpetuating a mentality of ownership which conditions the subjects' behaviour. Barthes does offer an example of a different toy, which seemingly stimulates creativity and independence rather than the sense of ownership, in the form of building blocks. However, he also notes that there are only rare examples of such toys and that the majority imitates the world of grown-ups and are "meant to produce children who are users, not creators" (ibid., 53). Both of these French authors offer their criticism of ideology and comment on its presence in all facets of contemporary life, thus providing a theoretical frame through which one can analyse the representations of ideology in twentieth century literature.

### 3. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial theory deals with the experience of colonisation, imperialism and imperialist ideology which was employed to justify the exploitation of colonized people and territories. We rely on this branch of literary criticism in order to formulate the theoretical framework which would encase the literary analyses of various 20<sup>th</sup> century plays – especially the plays written in the United Kingdom after the Second World War, such as those by Peter Shaffer or Caryl Churchill. The representative works on postcolonial theory which are included in the course on Twentieth Century Anglophone Literature are *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) by Aime Cesaire and Franz Fanon's study *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

In his study, Cesaire deconstructs imperialist ideology and discards the notion of colonialism being a philanthropic enterprise based on altruistic motives. Rather, he posits that the main reasons behind it are greed for materialistic goods and the establishment of dominance over particular territories and the peoples living in them. He examines how colonialism affects civilisations and whether it truly establishes meaningful contact between civilisations. The answer he arrives at is negative – for, while he acknowledges the need for the interaction among civilisations, he concludes that the contact colonialism enables is not of mutual benefit for both parties involved, but only in favour of the colonising force (Cesaire 1972, 10–12).

Moreover, Césaire talks about the psychological effects of colonialism on the coloniser. He introduces the notion of the boomerang effect in order to explain how the colonisers' dehumanising treatment of the natives causes the loss of their own humanity. The process of colonisation does not only leave a mark on those directly involved in it, but also affects those citizens of the European imperial powers who remain in their homelands with little to no regard or concern for the atrocities and crimes committed in the colonies. Césaire claims that such behaviour causes a universal regression which leads a society into a state of moral relativism and, ultimately, savagery (ibid., 13). The study also exposes the racist tendencies of certain pseudo-humanist European philosophers who supported the imperialist ideology. He singles out and criticises Ernest Renan, a French philosopher who advocated for a division of races based on certain deterministic inborn qualities, ultimately supporting the notion of the white 'master race' (ibid., 16).

On the other hand, in his chapter "On Violence" Fanon criticises colonialism and its dehumanising effect on the colonised natives, primarily from the psychological point of view. He also exposes one of the widespread racist theories that were present in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and isolated Algerians as innately aggressive. Fanon provides a quote from one of the World Health Organisation doctors who refers to Africans as 'lobotomised Europeans' claiming that they do not possess a frontal cortex and ultimately have a different brain structure, which allegedly makes them intellectually inferior to the white Europeans. Oppositely, Fanon says that this aggression identified in Algerians is not innate, but represents a direct result of colonialism which imposes harsh division within the colonised society and confines the natives in a certain unchangeable social position. The aggression and subsequent violence are a consequence of the desire to move and revolt against one's petrified position in society. Fanon argues that it is for this reason the aggressiveness becomes sedimented in the muscles of the colonized subjects. First, it manifests itself in dreams, and then it is wrongfully directed towards other colonised subjects:

*That is the colonial world. The colonial subject is a man penned in...The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits. Hence the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality...The colonised subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people. This is when black turns on black, and police officers and magistrates don't know which way to turn when faced with the surprising surge of North African criminality (Fanon 2004, 15–16).*

According to Fanon, freedom from such a state could be achieved by directing said violence not towards the other natives, but against the French colonisers (ibid., 16).

Both studies deconstruct the precarious relationship between the coloniser and the colonised and provide an insight into the dominant philosophical ideas of the time on colonisation and race. They provide the necessary terminology and key concepts which enable the students to understand the postcolonial theoretical framework.

#### 4. PSYCHOANALYSIS

Some of the major psychoanalytical theories and their relevance to the study of literature are discussed in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1983), in the chapter titled "Psychoanalysis", which is included in the course syllabus for Twentieth Century Anglophone Literature. Eagleton focuses on the theoretical ideas of Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, while

also exploring their interconnectedness and the way contemporary views on human psyche have developed from Freud's seminal insights.

In outlining Freud's theories, Eagleton focuses in particular on the Oedipus complex and its centrality to Freud's work, as well as its social and cultural implications. It is, as he argues, the point of our personal development at which we are constituted as subjects, and assume a position within the cultural order as a whole. Moreover,

*the Oedipus complex is for Freud the beginning of morality, conscience, law, and all forms of social and religious authority. The father's real or imagined prohibition of incest is symbolic of all the higher authority to be later encountered: and in "introjecting"... this particular law, the child begins to form what Freud calls its "superego", the awesome, punitive voice of conscience within it (Eagleton 1989: 156).*

Equally important at this stage of a child's development, as Eagleton points out, is the formation of the unconscious. He stresses that for Freud the unconscious is not some pre-existing, empty container waiting to receive one's guilty desires and other contents one suppresses from the conscious outlook: it only comes to being, and is opened up, by the act of primary repression – whereby the child, in obedience to the Father's law, renounces its incestuous desire for the mother's body. Eagleton also explains how this act of primary repression inevitably turns us into split subjects, torn between the conscious and the unconscious. He points to the radical otherness of the unconscious, its strangeness as a non-place which is wholly given over to instinctive urges and a relentless drive for pleasure, always threatening to resurface and destabilize the ego. These insights provide a valuable framework for understanding numerous characters in modern fiction who are plagued by inner division, or driven by unconscious motives they cannot fully account for.

In discussing Lacan's psychoanalysis, Eagleton foregrounds its relevance to our contemporary views on subjectivity, the place of human subject within society, and its relationship to language. In Lacan's theories on the infant's early development, the so-called "mirror stage" roughly corresponds to the same period that Freud has termed pre-Oedipal. Lacan posits a hypothetical situation whereby a small child observes its image in a mirror and gains the first sense of a unified self from the reflection, even though it still does not recognize this unity in its own body. This developmental phase is generally characterized by identifications: as Eagleton explains, it implies that we create a sense of self "by finding something in the world with which we can identify" (ibid., 165). As opposed to this, in the next stage of its development the child will gain its sense of selfhood not by establishing likeness, but by grasping differences. As it becomes aware of the presence of the father, the child also gains its first notion of itself as a gendered subject, whose identity comes about by means of difference, exclusion and absence: the same as in Freud's theories, it realizes it must relinquish its bonds to the mother's body. The crucial contribution of Lacan's re-interpretation of Freud lies in his observation that this process is intricately connected to our acquisition of language. As Eagleton writes, at this point the child begins to use language as a kind of substitute for the experience of plenitude which characterized its previous existence. It is as though the child had a direct, wordless access to reality through its contact with the mother's body, whereas now it can only refer to it indirectly by means of language. Lacan refers to this crucial stage as the entry into the symbolic order, "the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society" (ibid., 167).

While Lacan argues that there is no viable alternative to entering the symbolic order, this claim has been contested by numerous feminist critics – because, as Eagleton points out, “the symbolic order of which Lacan writes is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the father embodies” (ibid., 187–188). Eagleton singles out Julia Kristeva, whose notion of the “semiotic” opposes the oppressiveness of the symbolic order and offers the possibility of finding, within language, a residue of the pre-Oedipal experience of oneness with the mother’s body. The semiotic – which, according to Kristeva, functioned as a kind of non-verbal communication between the infant and the mother – continues to exist in certain elements of language, such as its tone, rhythm, bodily and material qualities, but also in silence, contradiction or absence. As the “other” of language, the semiotic is employed by some prominent modern authors, such as James Joyce or the French symbolist poets, as a way of disrupting and subverting received social meanings of some fixed signs upon which the dominant patriarchal ideology is based.

##### 5. AUTHORS’ POETICS

Apart from the poetry of two major Anglophone poets, Seamus Heaney and Adrienne Rich, the syllabus for Twentieth Century Anglophone Literature also includes their representative essays, in which these poets explain their aesthetic goals and writing techniques in their own terms. These two essays provide a valuable framework for interpreting their poems, while also showing how their preoccupations are related to those of other modern authors included in the course.

Seamus Heaney's essay “Feeling into Words” (1974) begins with a quote from Wordsworth's “Prelude”: “I would enshrine the spirit of the past/ For future restoration”. Heaney explains that he has chosen it in order to elucidate his own views on poetry – in particular, his idea that poems should be regarded as elements of continuity, preserving crucial values from the cultural and mythical traditions of the past and exploring how they can contribute to the spiritual well-being of the modern man. It is for the same reason that, when speaking of poetry, he uses the metaphor of digging, implying that a poet may unearth ancient wisdom the same way an archaeologist unearths material artefacts of past civilizations. “Digging” is also the title of Heaney’s well-known poem, in which he is concerned with preserving the essence of the family tradition of land-tilling through his verse.

The essay also includes Heaney’s discussion of the difference between “craft” and “technique”. Craft is for Heaney the skill of making an accomplished poem, involving the knowledge of elements such as rhyme and meter, and may be successfully learnt by studying the works of other poets. Technique is a much more important quality which, as Heaney explains, involves a poet’s definition “of his own stance towards life, a definition of his own reality” (Heaney 1984: 47). Craft is likened to turning the windlass and lowering a bucket into the well of poetry, whereas technique refers to the epiphanic moment when the “chain draws unexpectedly tight” and the bucket fills with water (ibid.). A figure which, in Heaney’s words, represents pure technique, is a water diviner. His gift for getting in touch with the underground currents of water is inborn and cannot be learnt, much like the poet's gift for writing. The poet and the diviner, in Heaney's metaphor, both release the hidden sources of vitality and renewal for the benefit of their entire community.

The motif of release, and the concomitant theme of exploring the unconscious, characterize much of Heaney's early poetry, and it is for the same reason that his second collection of poems is titled *Door into the Dark*. Commenting on it in his essay, Heaney singles out the poem "Undine", based on the myth of a river fairy who can become human if she marries a man and gives birth to his child. As he explains, "the myth is about the liberating, humanizing effect of sexual encounter" (ibid., 53), but the poem also relates it to the poet's childhood memory of a farmer who released a current of water through his field by clearing a drain from sludge. Several other poems discussed in the essay likewise serve Heaney to illustrate his point on how mythical traditions of the past may help the modern man in his quest for purpose and meaning, and how it is the role of the poet "to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past" (ibid., 60).

Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken" (1972) takes its title from a well-known play by Henrik Ibsen. As Rich explains, the play deals with an egotistical male artist who misuses a woman's affection and devotion in order to create a masterpiece, and with the woman's slow and painful awakening and realization of the use to which her life has been put. She also points out that this kind of egotism on behalf of male artists has been tolerated and even considered a norm for centuries – since, traditionally, it has always been men's lot to channel their energy into creation and achievement, even at the expense of others; while, on the other hand, selfless devotion to husband and family has been considered appropriate for women. In her essay, Rich argues that both of these gender stereotypes need to be deconstructed, and that even the word "love", as it is conceptualized within the patriarchal ideology, may be in need of revision (Rich 2004: 388).

The largest portion of the essay, however, focuses on the problems which a female author faces when, in opposition to these prescribed gender roles, she endeavours to express herself through some form of art. Drawing on her personal experience, Rich analyses the role of a woman in a traditional patriarchal family in order to explain why she considers it incompatible with creative writing. As she argues, a typical life of a mother or a housewife is characterized by discontinuity – whereby her imaginative efforts are repeatedly interrupted by carrying out chores and errands, and tending to small children's constant needs. This makes it impossible for her to engage in the imaginative transformation of reality, which is a precondition for creative writing, and for which "a certain freedom of the mind is needed – freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away" (ibid., 385). Furthermore, living in a traditional marriage entails certain conservatism, which clashes with the poet's need to constantly examine the dominant cultural norms and values; such a life is therefore opposed to the subversive function of imagination.

Rich points out, however, that this does not mean a poet should become unavailable to her loved ones, or turn into a "devouring ego" in order to create (ibid.). As she explains, it is due to the prescribed roles in a patriarchal family that a female writer inevitably experiences such inner split. The energy of relation and the energy of creation (i.e., the energy a poet invests in her personal relationships, and the energy she invests in writing) are tragically separated in our culture, and Rich considers it imperative to find a way of reuniting them.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As Terry Eagleton points out, twentieth century has been marked by a striking proliferation of literary theory, and as a consequence, the very meaning of “literature”, “reading” and “criticism” has undergone significant alteration (Eagleton 1989: vii). In our literary course, this impressive body of contemporary theoretical work is represented by just a small sample. However, the above mentioned texts have been chosen not only to introduce students to the key theoretical ideas in the field of literary studies, but also, and primarily, because of their applicability – i.e., their usefulness in analysing the relevant poems, novels and plays. Their purpose is to provide a framework which will enable the students to understand and discuss fictional characters, literary motifs, ideas and themes, dramatic devices or poetic imagery in the works of major twentieth century writers. In addition, this initial acquaintance with contemporary theoretical texts at the undergraduate level will no doubt make it easier for students to broaden their knowledge of theory later on, in the course of their postgraduate studies.

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## TEORIJSKI OKVIR ZA PROUČAVANJE ANGLOFONE KNJIŽEVNOSTI DVADESETOG VEKA

*Rad predstavlja pregled teorijskih tekstova i kritičkih eseja koji omogućavaju studentima da kontekstualizuju anglofonu književnost dvadesetog veka i shvate koncepte, preokupacije i motive koji su ključni za ovaj književni period. Studenti se upoznaju sa nekim od najvažnijih radova u oblasti književne teorije i studija kulture, čiji su autori Rolan Bart, Luj Altiser, Franc Fanon, Eme Sezer i Teri Iglton. Uz to, u kurs su uvršteni i eseji Šejmusa Hinija i Edrijen Rič, putem kojih se studenti upoznaju sa eksplicitnim poetikama ovih pesnika i lakše prilaze tumačenju njihove poezije. U radu se ukratko predstavlja svaki od ovih tekstova i objašnjava njegova moguća primena u izučavanju književnosti.*

Ključne reči: *ideološka kritika, postkolonijalna teorija, psihoanaliza, eksplicitne poetike*