

Traditional Literary Study: The Assumptions

1. There exists an undeniable canon of great literary works from writers such as Chaucer or Shakespeare.
2. Literary works are the products of men (and occasionally women) of genius.
3. Discovering the intentions of canonical authors is central to the task of literary studies.
4. Canonical authors somehow transcend the local limitations of their times (or any other time) to provide universal, eternal truths about the human condition.
5. The meaning of such works are "transparent" or "self-evident," and can be understood by a straightforward, commonsense reading of the literature, uncluttered by theory or ideology. Such straightforward readings are both possible and desirable. Traditional criticism is deeply suspicious of theory's tendency to link literature to "non-literary" issues.
6. A canonical text has certain essential attributes that are present in the text for every reader.
7. A canonical text has an "organic unity": all parts relate to each other and create an integrated, harmonious whole.
8. Literature and drama should be studied for aesthetic or intellectual reasons, not social or ideological purposes.

Critical Literary Theory: The Assumptions

1. There is no set thing such as "literature" apart from other writings. There is no "canon" that is not an artificial and subjective selection of works. There is not even a "Shakespeare" that is stable from one time-period and one culture to another. All these ideas have been constructed by particular groups at particular times in different ways to serve particular interests.
2. "Great works" like the writings of Chaucer or Shakespeare do not convey universal truths about the human condition. Rather, they express, sustain, and reproduce the ideology of dominant groups in order to maintain the material well-being of those groups. Particular viewpoints are thus falsely claimed to be universal truths.
3. Readers must always distinguish between the author's works and the social construction of those works. Often the author himself is little more than an iconic significance that changes as people's perspective changes.
4. There is no such thing as a straightforward, objective or disinterested reading. All interpretations are the products of particular ideologies. "Commonsense" is misleading because what is commonsense in one culture or time-period might be nonsense for another culture or time-period. Each is only a particular social viewpoint.
5. Theory provides more valid readings of literature: interpretations should draw upon the writings of major social, linguistic, anthropological, philosophical, or psychological theorists.
6. Writers like Shakespeare are not timeless. Ben Jonson's claim that Shakespeare was "not for an age, but for all time" is wrong. No literature can transcend time, or place, or be accessible to universal human understanding. Each text must be understood in terms of social, political, and ideological production and reception. Far from transcending this social context, literature is deeply involved in the ideological and material practices and social relationships of both its contemporary and modern readers. The study of literature is always political.
7. A text is not produced by authors, but by readers (who are themselves produced by social and political factors).
8. The harmonies, coherences, and unities traditionally found in plays are fictions. They yield to subversive readings that emphasize contradiction, disjunction, and fragmentation. Such readings challenge the affirmative, reconciliatory interpretations of traditional criticism.
9. Any discussion of aesthetics is heavily influenced by social factors because aesthetic taste is a social construct.
10. Theorists must be deeply suspicious of claims of intuition, imagination, insight, empathy, and personal response, as these are uncertain and irreproducible factors varying from reader to reader.