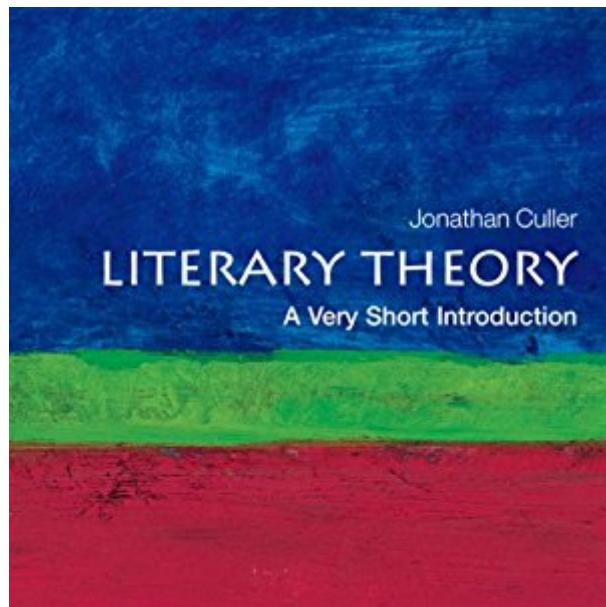


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# Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

What is literary theory? Is there a relationship between literature and culture? These are some of questions addressed by Jonathan Culler in this new edition of his highly popular *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Culler, an extremely lucid commentator and much admired in the field of literary theory, uses easy-to-grasp examples as he outlines the ideas behind schools of criticism that can otherwise be quite daunting, such as deconstruction, semiotics, and postcolonial theory. He explains "theory" not by describing warring "schools" but by sketching key "moves" that theory has encouraged, and by speaking directly about the implications of theory for thinking about literature, human identity, and the power of language. In this Second Edition, Culler includes much new material, including a discussion of the "death of theory," a look at topics such as trauma theory, eco-criticism, and the link between the theory of narrative and cognitive science, plus a new chapter on "Ethics and Aesthetics." Shedding light on everything from literature and social identity, to poetry, poetics, and rhetoric, *Literary Theory* is a welcome guide for all lovers of literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an excellent text for students new to literary theory, but even the more experienced readers should be delighted by it. Rather than simply making an historical tour through various schools of thought, Culler relegates that to a useful appendix and instead focuses on key questions and concepts, beginning with 'What is Theory?' and 'What is Literature?' - two very good questions which are too rarely asked. He then explores various focuses of literary studies, such as meaning,

poetics, narrative and identity. Culler's great skill here is to summarize without simplifying; to make refreshingly plain what other writers seem to delight in rendering obscure. (His cogent analysis of the intersection between literature and cultural studies in Chapter 3 is the clearest and most insightful I've ever read.) Intelligently structured, full of useful examples, and often employing a wryly humorous tone, Culler makes literary theory interesting, inspiring and above all accessible - something any student will undoubtedly appreciate.

I studied literary theory at University for several years, but in all that time I never once heard a professor explain the basic framework that theory operates under. Thank somebody at Oxford University Press and J Culler for finally doing it! Now I can go back with some idea of what it is everyone is assuming I already know. There are quite a few instances where the author uses terms generally reserved for academic conversation. However, the book is neither trite, nor pandering, nor condescending. It simply explains the basic idea of how literary theory works and what it strives to achieve. If I ever make to past my doctoral thesis and into an actual teaching sitch, I'd think about using this book with freshmen as a way of introducing theory in an unitimidating way.

Literary theory is a pretty imposing topic, and it's especially imposing to people like myself who don't have a liberal arts education. So, I was really happy to find Culler's introduction to literary theory. Rather than hiding behind a taxonomy of the various schools of thought, he discusses and attempts to answer some difficult questions: What is theory? What is literature? Why might we care about the answers to these questions? My take on this book is that Culler has successfully managed to convey some of the difficult and interesting challenges of theory to uninitiated readers without dumbing down the subject too much. Recommended.

First, if you have ever speculated that "theory" is primarily posturing by intellectuals with too much time on their hands in an attempt to justify their fringe political/social views, this book will probably confirm that belief for you. Further, if you have ever suspected that the arcane jargon created by "theory" practitioners is little more than obfuscation to ensure that their more outrageous pronouncements will be immune from refutation by intelligent but uninitiated outsiders, this book will do little to dissuade you. Nonetheless, if you want an approachable explication of what "theory" is all about, this is the book for you. Professor Culler does not argue the case for a particular school of thought, but explains (eschewing jargon when possible) the underlying currents of thought that drive literary analysis today. He starts by explaining the inextricable connection of literature theory to

cultural studies and proceeds to explore the ramifications of that marriage. He then examines how literature theory attempts to answer questions about the nature of self, language, and meaning. To ensure that no single movement is given precedence, short descriptions of the tenets of the various schools are relegated to an appendix. The sheer number of approaches listed is breathtaking -- Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Phenomenology, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, Feminist Theory, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, New Historicism/Cultural Materialism, Post-Colonial Theory, Minority Discourse, and Queer Theory. So, if you simply want to know what all the "fuss" is about, or if you want to embark on a more serious study, start here.

Jonathan Culler has done a marvelous job writing exactly what the title promises. Unlike some of the Short Intro books (like the Foucault one), Culler understands that the people reading the book are novices at literary theory and need to be walked through the concepts but not in a condescending way. Part of the problem with having major scholars write short introductions to their field is that they know too much and it is often hard for them to remember how little everyone else knows. But Culler is a rare author who does not seem to have this problem at all. He never lost me. My favorite thing about this book is the first section which talks about theory in general, and answers the question, "What is theory?" If you've been confused about all the theory terms you've heard, deconstruction, Foucault, Derrida, postmodernism etc. etc. etc., and if you feel like you don't understand all the categories of theory, and don't understand how literary theory interacts with other types of theory and who all the major thinkers are in this whole movement, then this book, like none I've ever seen, will set you straight. The rest of the book is great too, though I question the marginalization of the discussion about the different schools of theory by sticking them all in the appendix. Why not give them their own chapter?

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