

What kind of critic are you?

Below is a quiz.¹ Take your time over each answer; circle whether you agree most with statement 'A' or statement 'B'. Where you think you agree with both statements, try and choose the one which instinctually seems right to you (usually the statement you agreed with most upon the first time you read it).

¹ This quiz has been adapted from a version prepared by Dr Anne Hartman for use with internal students at Goldsmiths.

1.
 - a. There is such a thing as 'human nature'.
 - b. There is no essential 'human nature'. 'Human nature' is unstable and contingent upon social conditioning and other external influences.

2.
 - a. The moral content of literature is its *raison d'être*; formal literary qualities and historical contexts are secondary to the moral power and influence of the literary text.
 - b. Literature is a moral form, but its moral content is always ideologically mediated. Literature is a product of a particular political and historical moment.

3.
 - a. Literary texts have inherent meanings and it is the task of the literary critic to illuminate these for the reader.
 - b. Literary texts have no inherent meaning; each reading of a literary text is produced within a particular social and historical context. A twenty-first century reading of *Hamlet* is simply different from a nineteenth-century reading; neither one is necessarily correct.

4.
 - a. Broadly speaking, the purpose of language is to reflect reality.
 - b. Language does not reflect reality but produces it; no reality can exist outside of, or prior to, language.

5.
 - a. The study of literature is or should be a civilising process.
 - b. The teaching of literature can all too easily become an ideological tool of the middle class to reproduce their own values.

6.
 - a. Great literature can lift the reader clear of the bondage of history.
 - b. Literature is always a product of a particular historical moment and can only be understood within the context of the historical moment when it was produced.

7.
 - a. Great literature is timeless.
 - b. No literature is timeless. It is possible that in 500 years' time no one in Britain will be interested in Shakespeare or Dickens.

8. a. Some literature is more valuable than other literature.
b. Literary value is historically, socially and politically contingent. A text that one particular society or social group might regard as being of great value (morally, philosophically or artistically) may be worthless to another society or social group. All value is relative, and no absolute value judgments can be made.

9. a. Interpreting language means attending to the connections between words and the external world of 'reality'.
b. Interpreting language means attending to a signifying system or network of relations that depends on relations of difference between signs in a chain of signifiers.

10. a. Words are symbols that have a natural connection with the world, so these symbols call up likenesses, similarities and affinities with the world outside language.
b. Because the meaning of signs depends on relations of difference, the element of contrast or binary opposition is fundamental to language and thought.

11. a. A text is above all the expression of an individual author's mind and feelings.
b. The relationships in and between texts are the production of a culture, not individuals.

Once you have finished, total up your score. How many 'As' did you get? How many 'Bs'? Complete the box below:

Total number of 'A' statements I agree with the most:	
Total number of 'B' statements I agree with the most:	

Do not read on until you have done this scoring!

Feedback

Broadly speaking, 'A' statements express **liberal humanist** ideas about literature, and 'B' statements express approaches taken by **theorists** about literature since around the 1960s. They have been put together in pairs like this so you can see just how much the two positions seem to 'oppose' one another.

Most people, when asked these questions, would align with the **liberal humanist** position; this tends to be the 'common sense' view, and certainly appeals to some of the most vital reasons we choose to read literature: to learn about ourselves, our world, and to have some kind of enriching experience. This connection of literature to ideas of human purpose is one that runs back centuries – you see this very readily when you study works like Homer's *The Iliad* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on the **Explorations in Literature** course.

What is liberal humanism?

As Barry (2009) outlines in Chapter 1 of *Beginning theory* (a set text for **Approaches to Text**), the human subject, and their productions, gained a new focus in the nineteenth century in the West. The decline of the church, coupled with the rise of an industrial, capitalist culture meant that human subjects gained an agency that they had never enjoyed before: freed from the fetters of the church and with more leisure time afforded by the new structures of working that capitalism ushered in, the human subject effectively became 'liberalised'. As a result, 'writers' became 'authors' (you may be surprised to know that 'author' did not exist as a concept until the nineteenth century); literature diversified as 'the novel' gained ascendancy. People turned to literature not simply for moral or divine instruction, but for pleasure. 'Literature', as a category, was born.

So why are statements 'B' so oppositional? And why, for many of us (academics included) is 'theory' so difficult, specific and sometimes plain contrary? Well, it may help to think about where a liberal humanist approach to the world might lead us: it prizes the individual over all else, and so it grants authority in a literary text to the author more than to the reader. In contrast, theorists take little at face value; they take the culture, politics and society in which a literary work has emerged to be as important as the literary work and the so-called esteemed 'author'. It is perhaps no small coincidence that the rise of literary theory coincides with the rise of several prominent civil rights movements: the women's movement; the African-American civil rights movement; lesbian and gay rights movements; and, more latterly, anticolonialism and environmentalism. That is, the rise of literary theory coincides with the rise of debates about what the human subject is, debates about the complexity of human identity and the complexity of human society. It engages with the problems, oppressions and difficulties of the wider culture in which a literary work is produced. This is what you will study on the **Approaches to Text** course.

Thinking about next steps? Save any work you do here in case it is useful to you when the course begins – your tutor, for instance, might invite you to discuss your experience of the taster activity.