Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism

A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different lenses critics use to view and talk about art, literature, and even culture. These different lenses allow critics to consider works of art based on certain assumptions within that school of theory. The different lenses also allow critics to focus on particular aspects of a work they consider important.

What is Feminism?

Feminist criticism explores the ways in which literature (and other fine arts/media) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women.

- Women are oppressed by patriarchy (*male dominance*). This means that men are economically, politically, socially, and psychologically dominant.
- Women are defined only by their difference from male norms and values.
- All of western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal dominance, for example, in the biblical portrayal of Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world.
- While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine).
- All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality.
- Gender issues play a part in every aspect of the human experience, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

Typical Questions:

- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female roles defined?
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
- How do characters embody these traits?
- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others’ reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the role of women versus men (economically, politically, socially, and/or psychologically)?
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?
- How does society react to media/fine arts that defy typical gender roles?
- What place does this piece have in feminist theory and tradition?

What is Marxism?

Marxism is a literary theory based on the philosophy of Karl Marx.

- This philosophy focuses on class systems (namely, socio-economic issues) within a Capitalist society.
- **Capitalism** is an economic system where profit is the highest aim, and each individual’s rights are valued higher than the group’s.
- Marx opposed Capitalism and was in favor of the group versus the individual.
- Class struggles arise when capitalistic methods lead to a divided society of “haves” and “have nots”.
- This divide leads to unrest, social opposition, and ultimately revolution.

Typical Questions:

- Who benefits from the work that’s done?
- What is the social class of the author?
- What values does the work of literature reinforce?
- What values does the work subvert/undermine?
- What social classes do the characters represent?
- How do the different classes define and oppose each other?
What is New Historian?

This literary theory maintains that a literary piece is a product of the cultural experiences and ways of thinking, and interpretation rather than facts. New Historians take in consideration the social and cultural background of the author and his/her time period.

- This school seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time.
- New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it.
  - The retelling of history itself
- Questions asked by traditional historians and by new historicists are quite different.
  - Traditional historians ask, “What happened?” and “What does the event tell us about history?”
  - New historicists ask, “How has the event been interpreted?” and “What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?”
- New historicists do not believe that we can look at history objectively, but rather that we interpret events as products of our time and culture.

Typical Questions:

- What language/characters/events/culture presented in the work reflect the current events of the author’s day?
  - What meanings of words have changed over time?
  - How are such events interpreted and presented by the author and reader?
  - Does the work’s presentation support or criticize the event? Can it be seen to do both?
  - How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical/cultural texts from the same period...? (ex. Looking at *The Great Gatsby*, how did it illustrate the 1920s?)

What is Modernism?

Don't confuse Modernism in literature with the standard dictionary definition of modern. Modernism in literature is not a chronological designation. Instead, Modernism in literature consists of literary works possessing one or more loosely defined characteristics.

- Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition
  - This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views.
- Modernists’ reaction against tradition is evidenced not just in content, but in form, or the way the works of literature and art are structured.
  - Multiple narrators instead of a fixed narration
  - Non-linear chronology
  - Stream of consciousness
  - Lack of clear-cut moral positions
  - Lack of hero vs. villain dichotomy
- Modernists believe the world is created in the act of perceiving it; that is, the world is what we say it is.
- All things are relative.
- Modernists feel no connection with history or institutions.
  - Their experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.
- Modernists champion the individual and celebrate inner strength.
- Believe life is unordered, unfair, and does not always (or never does) make sense.
- Modernists are interested in the sub-conscious mind.
What is Post-Colonial Criticism?

Colonialism is the expansion of nations or empires by taking control over a population or culture and imposing their own cultural philosophies.

- Examples include the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire, colonialism, and Manifest Destiny.
- Rather than glorifying the exploratory nature of European colonists as they expanded their sphere of influence, Post-Colonialists explore the various impacts of the imposition of western religion and economics on native populations during colonial rule.
- Post-colonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to control and influence over native populations (western colonizers controlling the colonized).

Typical Questions:

- How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression?
- What does the text reveal about the problems of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity?
- What person(s) or groups does the work identify as "other" or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated?
- What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anti-colonialist resistance?
- What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?
- How does the text respond to or comment upon the characters, themes, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) work?
- Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different post-colonial populations?

What is Psychoanalytic Theory?

- A critical lens for critiquing and understanding literature, using the ideologies of Freud and/or Jung.
- Involves an analysis of both characters and authors mind and behavior.
- Freudian analysis focuses on the dysfunctional side of human behavior.
  o Analyzes the id, ego and super-ego.
  o Analyzes the defenses and core issues that characters exhibit.
- Jungian analysis focuses on archetypes in plot and character.

Typical Questions:

- Do any of the characters exhibit dysfunctional behavior?
- What are the psychological motives behind each character’s behavior?
- How are the emotional problems they exhibit responsible for what they do?
- Are there any Oedipal dynamics at work?
- What does the work suggest about the psychological being of the author?
- Are there prominent words in the piece that could have different or hidden meanings that suggest something about the author’s unconscious?
- What archetypes are present in the text? And how does the text mirror the archetypal narrative form?
- How do the id, ego and super-ego play a role in the characters?

Other Theories to Explore and Research:
New-Criticism/Formalism
African American Theory
Gender Studies and Lesbian/Gay Theory