Literary Theory Overview

What is literary theory?
- The way people read texts
- The “lens” through which you view the literature
- There is no “right” way to look at literature
- All schools of thought think they are the “right” way

The Creation of Literary Theory:
- 20th Century: theories began to emerge
- No theory is based in factual knowledge- someone created it and it is arguable
- Some theories are created in opposition or response to another theory

Using Theories:
- Rigid application of a theory can spoil a book
- Using multiple theories can enhance the story
- This is an open ended process- NOT a science

Reader Response
- Making a connection between your experiences and the text
- Literature has no objective meaning
- A reader brings their own thoughts and experiences
- For Example:
  - Connect the literature to your life
  - Connect the literature to current events
  - Discuss how the literature makes you feel
  - Compare the literature to the way you view the world

Formalist Criticism
- Scientific “dissection” of texts
- Focus on literary elements
- Analyze: setting, character, plot, theme, imagery, foreshadowing, irony, etc.
- Common Assumptions of Formalist Criticism
  - Literature is a special mode of language and different from every day language
  - A literary work is independent of the author and historical context during which it was written

Archetypal Criticism
- Archetypes are universal symbols that appear in literature, myth, dreams, oral tradition, songs, etc.
- Examples of Archetypes:
  - Images such as:
    - water
    - sun
    - certain colors or numbers
    - circles
    - the serpent
    - garden
• tree
• desert
• Characters such as:
  • “the hero”
  • “the earth mother”
  • “the soul mate”
  • “the trickster”
  • “the damsel in distress”
• Ideas such as:
  • Light vs. Darkness
  • Good vs. Evil
  • The Journey/Quest
• Common Assumptions of Archetypal Criticism:
  • Certain images recur in texts
  • Certain characters/character types recur in texts
  • Certain motifs and patterns recur in texts

Cultural/Post-Colonial Criticism
• Examines how different religions, ethnicities, class identifications, and political beliefs affect how texts are created and interpreted
• What it means to be part of- or excluded from- a particular group enhances understanding of the text in relation to culture
• Colonialism
  • Colonialism is the political and economic control over a dependent territory
  • Colonialism seeks to shape the identities of the colonized people
  • Uses a process called “othering”- the colonized are seen as different and lesser than the colonized
• Common Assumptions of Post-colonialism
  • It is important to look at the relationship between dominant and non-dominant cultures
  • Many times, literature written by colonized people attempts to articulate empowered identities and reclaim culture

Historical/Biographical Criticism
• According to Wilfred Guerin, historical/biographical criticisms "...sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of the author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work" (Guerin, 22).
• Common Assumptions of Historical/Biographical Criticism
  • Understanding the social structure or way of life of a certain time period will help the reader draw conclusions and better understand the story
  • Discovering details about the author's life and times will help the reader develop ideas about a story

New Historical Criticism
• New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the ideas and assumptions of its historical era
• Concerned with the political function of literature and with the concept of power
Focused on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a "truth" but a "cultural construct") reflected in a given work.

Literature will tell us about ways of thinking at the time: ideas of social organization, prejudices, taboos, etc.

New Historicism is more "sociohistorical" than it is a delving into facts concerned with cultural constructs of society. It's not just where would Keats have seen a Grecian urn in England, but from where he may have absorbed the definitions of art and beauty.

**Psychological/Psychoanalytical Criticism**
- Deals with the work of literature as a fictional expression of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of the author.
- The idea is to evaluate the psychology of the character or the author to find meaning in the text.
- Common Assumptions of Psychological Criticism:
  - The author's psychological conflicts are revealed in his or her work.
  - Readers can do an in-depth analysis of the characters as if they were real people.
  - The reader's psychological analysis of a piece of text might analyze the author's psychological state or the reader's own psychological state of mind.

**Marxist Criticism**
- Based on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx, founder of communism.
- Communism: a stateless, classless society.
- Wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).
- Deals with class struggles.
- Marx argued that capitalism, like previous socioeconomic systems, will produce internal tensions which will lead to its destruction.
- Marx believed that groups of people that owned and controlled major industries could exploit the rest of the population by forcing their own values and beliefs onto other social groups.
- How to Use Marxist Theory?
  - Focus on power and money in the literature.
  - Who has the power or money?
  - Who does not?
  - What happens as a result?

**Feminist Criticism**
- Realizes cultural and economic problems in a "patriarchal" society.
- Realizes issues that have hindered or prevented women from achievement.
- Recognizes that society sees women as “other” to man.
- Common Assumptions of Feminist Criticism:
  - Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal.
  - The concepts of “gender” are cultural constructs.
  - The patriarchal ideology pervades writing that has been considered “great literature”.
  - “Great literature” lacks autonomous female role models.
  - Primarily addresses male readers.
  - Makes the female reader an “outsider”- assumes male values to identify.
- Strategies for Using Feminist Criticism.
• Consider the gender of the author and the characters- what role does gender or sexuality play in this work?
• How are sexual stereotypes reinforced?
• How does the work reflect or distort the place of women or men in society?

**Structuralism**
- Structuralism is a way of thinking about the world in relationship to structures
- Every element in the literature has no significance by itself- it is determined by all the other elements involved in the literature
- The literature is a stable, closed entity with definite meaning

**Postmodern Theory**
- A reaction to structuralism
- The reader can find endless meaning
- There is no single center, essence, or meaning in the literature
- Modern vs. Post-Modern Theory
  - Modernist:
    - WWI: The belief in human goodness is splintered
    - Yeats says, “The center will not hold”
    - People feel alienated from one another
    - Can no longer could count on unifying beliefs or behaviors
    - Veered away from linearity or harmony
  - Postmodernist:
    - WWII: The Holocaust and atomic bomb took the splintered views of modernism and destroyed them entirely
    - “There never was a center”
    - Stresses absences, contradictions, sub-texts, and the inability of language to connect one human being with another
  
- Modernism
  - There is an absolute, universal truth that we can understand through rationalism and logic
  - "disenchantment with material truth and search for abstract truth."
- Postmodernism
  - There is no universal truth. Rationality by itself does not help us truly understand the world
  - "There is no universal truth, abstract or otherwise."
- Many Modernists Think:
  - Works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost in most of modern life
  - Art will do what other human institutions fail to do
- Postmodernists
  - Postmodernism doesn’t mind fragmentation or incoherence, but rather celebrates that lack of meaning
  - Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense

• No objective and absolute truth
• Rather, ideas are viewed as being social constructions
• It is a broad movement with many different writers, often disagreeing among themselves