Psychoanalytic

“Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of ‘reading’ employed by Freud and later theorists to interpret texts. It argues that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author’s own neuroses. One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author’s psyche. […]

“Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilt, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work. The author’s own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the character in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as ‘symbolism’ (the repressed object represented in disguise), ‘condensation’ (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and ‘displacement’ (anxiety located onto another image by means of association).

“Despite the importance of the author here, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with ‘what the author intended.’ But what the author never intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind.

“Psychoanalytic critics will ask such questions as, ‘What is Hamlet’s problem?’ or ‘Why can’t Bronte seem to portray any positive mother figures?’” (Delahoyde)

Marxist

“According to Marxists, and to other scholars in fact, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism: think how often the quest for wealth traditionally defines characters. So Marxists generally view literature ‘not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as “products” of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era’ (Abrams 149). Literature reflects an author’s own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be.

“The Marxist critic simply is a careful reader or viewer who keeps in mind issues of power and money, and any of the following kinds of questions:

- What role does class play in the work; what is the author’s analysis of class relations?
- How do characters overcome oppression?
In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo; or does it try to undermine it?

Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?" (Delahoyde).

**Feminist**

"Feminist literary criticism, arising in conjunction with sociopolitical feminism, critiques patriarchal language and literature by exposing how these reflect masculine ideology. It examines gender politics in works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positionings, and marginalizations within works.

"Beyond making us aware of the marginalizing uses of traditional language (the presumptuousness of the pronoun ‘he,’ or occupational words such as ‘mailman’) feminists focused on language have noticed a stylistic difference in women’s writing: women tend to use reflexive constructions more than men (e.g., ‘She found herself crying’). They have noticed that women and men tend to communicate differently: men directed toward solutions, women toward connecting.

"Feminist criticism concerns itself with stereotypical representations of genders. It also may trace the history of relatively unknown or undervalued women writers, potentially earning them their rightful place within the literary canon, and helps create a climate in which women’s creativity may be fully realized and appreciated.

"One will frequently hear the term ‘patriarchy’ used among feminist critics, referring to traditional male-dominated society. ‘Marginalization’ refers to being forced to the outskirts of what is considered socially and politically significant; the female voice was traditionally marginalized, or discounted altogether" (Delahoyde).

**New Criticism**

"New Criticism emphasizes explication, or "close reading," of "the work itself." It rejects old historicism’s attention to biographical and sociological matters. Instead, the objective determination as to "how a piece works" can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through extraneous and erudite special knowledge. It has long been the pervasive and standard approach to literature in college and high school curricula.

"New Criticism, incorporating Formalism, examines the relationships between a text’s ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it. New Critics "may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence of meaning" (Biddle 100). New Criticism attempts to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary, some of which we all had to learn in junior high school English classes (third-person, denouement, etc.). Working with patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point
of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of the text, they seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these to the self-contained work.

“The author’s intentions are "neither available nor desirable" (nor even to be taken at face value when supposedly found in direct statements by authors). Meaning exists on the page. Thus, New Critics insist that the meaning of a text is intrinsic and should not be confused with the author's intentions nor the work’s affective dimension (its impressionistic effects on the reader). The "intentional fallacy" is when one confuses the meaning of a work with the author's purported intention (expressed in letters, diaries, interviews, for example). The "affective fallacy" is the erroneous practice of interpreting texts according to the psychological or emotional responses of readers, confusing the text with its results.

“To do New Critical reading, ask yourself, "How does this piece work?" Look for complexities in the text: paradoxes, ironies, ambiguities. Find a unifying idea or theme which resolves these tensions” (Delahoyde).

**African American Criticism**

“Black” or “African-American” criticism is marked by the following considerations:

- A sense that black writing comes out of a sociological, political, ideological and cultural situation marked by oppression and marginalization. “Black” reading then must negotiate the difficult boundaries between textual and cultural meanings, between ‘aesthetic’ and ideological impacts.
- A sense that criticism is inevitably ideological and political, and that black experience and the expression of that experience is an historical, cultural formation of oppression. The ‘art’ of black art is inevitably, then, a complex cultural formation. Black criticism has substantial ties to post-colonial criticism, and to the issues in it of the representation of the ‘other, the reclamation of identity in the forms and language of the oppressor, and the notions of parody, mimicry and hybridity.
- An awareness that black experience is historical and cultural: that it has ties to African language, cultural practices and attitudes, that it is formed through the experience of slavery and violence, that it has endured a long and troubled negotiation with white culture positively and negatively.
- An attempt to recognize and celebrate that which is distinctively and positively black in black art, that is, which owes its meaning and expression to the particular expressions and traditions of black culture and experience. The most influential black aesthetic contribution, jazz, forms for many a model or metonym for black aesthetics and culture.
Lesbian, Gay and Queer Criticism

Gender studies and queer theory explore issues of sexuality, power, and marginalized populations (woman as other) in literature and culture. Much of the work in gender studies and queer theory, while influenced by feminist criticism, emerges from post-structural interest in fragmented, de-centered knowledge building (Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault), language (the breakdown of sign-signifier), and psychoanalysis (Lacan).

A primary concern in gender studies and queer theory is the manner in which gender and sexuality is discussed: "Effective as this work [feminism] was in changing what teachers taught and what the students read, there was a sense on the part of some feminist critics that...it was still the old game that was being played, when what it needed was a new game entirely. The argument posed was that in order to counter patriarchy, it was necessary not merely to think about new texts, but to think about them in radically new ways" (Richter 1432).

Therefore, a critic working in gender studies and queer theory might even be uncomfortable with the binary established by many feminist scholars between masculine and feminine: "Cixous (following Derrida in *Of Grammatology*) sets up a series of binary oppositions (active/passive, sun/moon...father/mother, logos/pathos). Each pair can be analyzed as a hierarchy in which the former term represents the positive and masculine and the latter the negative and feminine principle" (Richter 1433-1434).

Typical questions:

- What elements of the text can be perceived as being masculine (active, powerful) and feminine (passive, marginalized) and how do the characters support these traditional roles?
- What sort of support (if any) is given to elements or characters who question the masculine/feminine binary? What happens to those elements/characters?
- What elements in the text exist in the middle, between the perceived masculine/feminine binary? In other words, what elements exhibit traits of both (bisexual)?
- How does the author present the text? Is it a traditional narrative? Is it secure and forceful? Or is it more hesitant or even collaborative?
- What are the politics (ideological agendas) of specific gay, lesbian, or queer works, and how are those politics revealed in...the work's thematic content or portrayals of its characters?
- What are the poetics (literary devices and strategies) of a specific lesbian, gay, or queer works?
- What does the work contribute to our knowledge of queer, gay, or lesbian experience and history, including literary history?
- How is queer, gay, or lesbian experience coded in texts that are by writers who are apparently homosexual?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (socially, politically, psychologically) homophobic?
Postcolonial Criticism

A type of cultural criticism, postcolonial criticism usually involves the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point in their history. Alternatively, it can refer to the analysis of texts written about colonized places by writers hailing from the colonizing culture. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial criticism and studies, focused on the way in which the colonizing First World has invented false images and myths of the Third (postcolonial) World—stereotypical images and myths that have conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination of Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures and peoples. In the essay "Postcolonial Criticism" (1992), Homi K. Bhabha has shown how certain cultures (mis)represent other cultures, thereby extending their political and social domination in the modern world order.

Postcolonial studies, a type of cultural studies, refers more broadly to the study of cultural groups, practices, and discourses—including but not limited to literary discourses—in the colonized world. The term postcolonial is usually used broadly to refer to the study of works written at any point after colonization first occurred in a given country, although it is sometimes used more specifically to refer to the analysis of texts and other cultural discourses that emerged after the end of the colonial period (after the success of the liberation and independence movements). Among feminist critics, the postcolonial perspective has inspired an attempt to recover whole cultures of women heretofore ignored or marginalized—women who speak not only from colonized places but also from the colonizing places to which many of them fled.

Postcolonial criticism has been influenced by Marxist thought, by the work of Michel Foucault (whose theories about the power of discourses have influenced the new historicism), and by deconstruction, which has challenged not only hierarchical, binary oppositions such as West/East and North/South but also the notions of superiority associated with the first term of each opposition.

Ecocriticism

*Ecocriticism* is an umbrella term under which a variety of approaches fall; this can make it a difficult term to define. As ecocritic Lawrence Buell says, ecocriticism is an “increasingly heterogeneous movement” (i). But, “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). Emerging in the 1980s on the shoulders of the environmental movement begun in the 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, ecocriticism has been and continues to be an “earth-centered approach” (Glotfelty xviii) the complex intersections between environment and culture, believing that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, calling for collaboration between natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists, historians, and more. Ecocriticism asks us to examine ourselves and the world around us, critiquing the way that we represent, interact with, and construct the environment, both “natural” and manmade. At the heart of ecocriticism, many maintain, is “a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point” (Buell i). The “challenge” for ecocritics is “keep[ing] one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always […] culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists” (Gerrard 10). Similar to critical traditions examining gender and race, ecocriticism deals not only with the socially-constructed, often dichotomous categories we create for reality, but with reality itself.

This theory is broken down into different Approaches:

1. Pastoral – focuses on the dichotomy between urban and rural life (idealization of nature and the demonization of urban)
2. Wilderness – examines ways in which wilderness is constructed, valued, and engaged
3. Ecofeminism – analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature

Typical Questions:

- How is nature represented in this text?
- How has the concept of nature changed over time?
- How is the setting of the play/film/text related to the environment?
- What is the influence on metaphors and representations of the land and the environment on how we treat it?
- How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in popular culture and literary works?
- How are animals represented in this text and what is their relationship to humans?
- How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in this play/film/text/etc.
- Where is the environment placed in the power hierarchy?
- How is nature empowered or oppressed in this work?
- What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities, immigrants, etc.) and treatment of the land?
- What rhetorical moves are used by environmentalists, and what can we learn from them about our cultural attitudes towards nature?
Humanist Theory

**New Humanism**, critical movement in the United States between 1910 and 1930, based on the literary and social theories of the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold, who sought to recapture the moral quality of past civilizations—the best that has been thought and said—in an age of industrialization, materialism, and relativism.

Reacting against the scientifically oriented philosophies of literary realism and naturalism, New Humanists refused to accept deterministic views of human nature. They argued that:

1. human beings are unique among nature’s creatures;
2. the essence of experience is fundamentally moral and ethical; and
3. the human will, although subject to genetic laws and shaped by the environment, is essentially free.

With these points of contention, the New Humanists—Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, Norman Foerster, and Robert Shafer, to name only a few—outlined an entire program and aesthetic to incorporate their beliefs. By the 1930s the New Humanists had come to be regarded as cultural elitists and advocates of social and aesthetic conservatism, and their influence became negligible.