

# LITERARY CRITICISM

The paradigms and the possibilities...

# DEFINITION ...

**Literary criticism** is the study, discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of literature.

# Let's try again ...

"Literary criticism is the evaluation of literary works. This includes the classification by genre, analysis of structure, and judgement of value."

# And again ...

"Literary criticism asks what literature is, what it does, and what it is worth."

# In my own words ...

Literary criticism is the method used to interpret any given work of literature. The different schools of literary criticism provide us with lenses which ultimately reveal important aspects of the literary work.

# Why do we have to analyze *everything*????

- \* Talking about experiences enhances our enjoyment of them
- \* Talking about experiences involves the search for meaning which increases our understanding of them
- \* Because Socrates said so: "The life which is unexamined is not worth living."

# To further explain ...

**Literary criticism helps us to understand what is important about the text**

- \* its structure
- \* its context: social, economic, historical
- \* what is written
- \* how the text manipulates the reader

# And there's more ...

- \* **Literary criticism helps us to understand the relationship between authors, readers, and texts**
- \* **The act of literary criticism ultimately enhances the enjoyment of our reading of the literary work**

# Literary Criticism

Literary criticism has two main functions:

1. To analyze, study, and evaluate works of literature.
2. To form general principles for the examination of works of literature.

# What is literary theory?

- \* *The capacity to generalize about phenomena and to develop concepts that form the basis for interpretation and analysis—in this instance, of a “literary” text.*



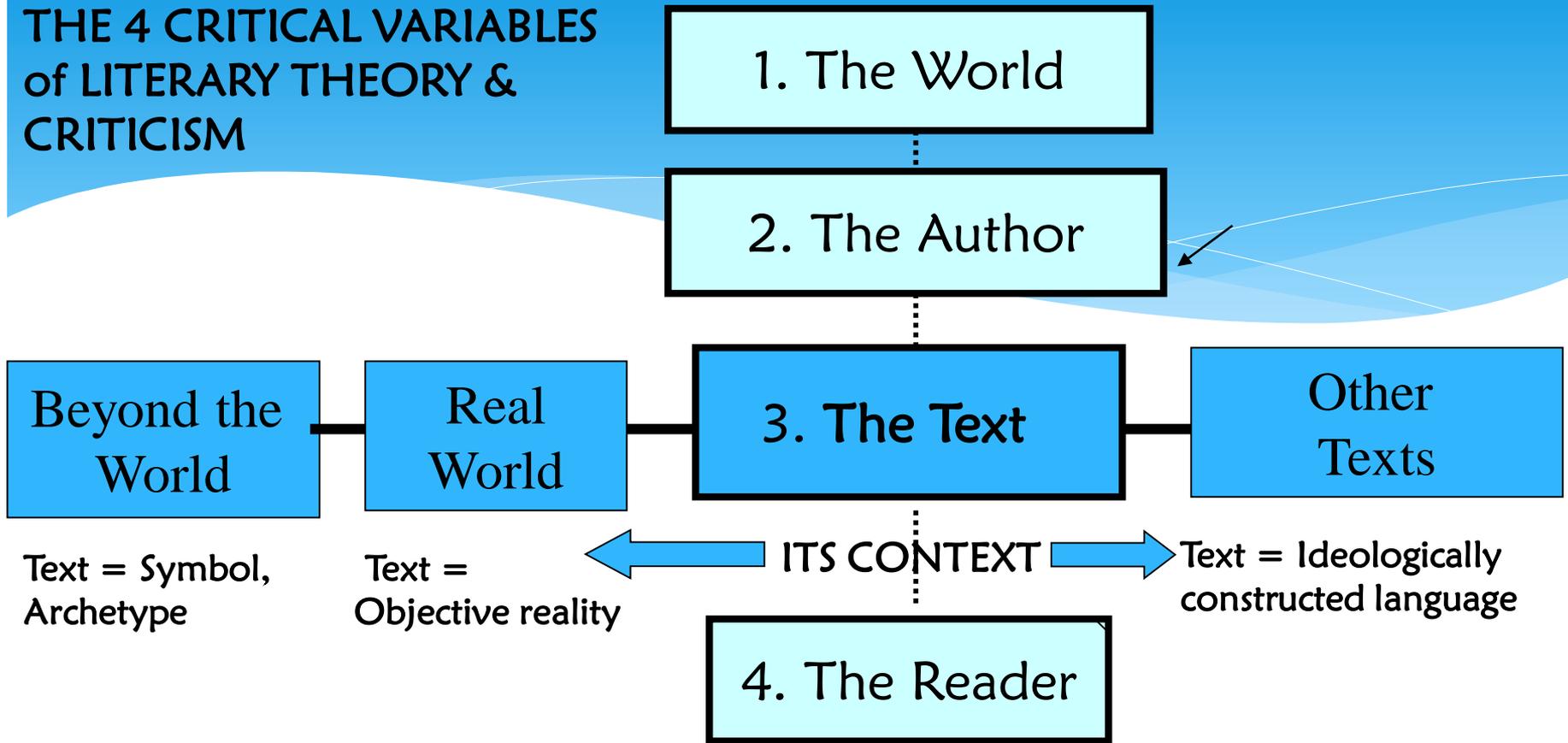
# YOU'RE GOING TO STUDY EIGHT PARADIGMS ...

1. Formalism
2. Marxism
3. Feminism
4. Psychoanalytic
5. Cultural Criticism
6. Structuralism
7. Post-structuralism
8. Archetypal

# But there are many more ...

- \* Author intention
- \* Reader Response
- \* Biological
- \* Cognitive scientific
- \* Moralist
- \* Queer
- \* Socio-political
- \* Sociological
- \* And so many more ...

# THE 4 CRITICAL VARIABLES of LITERARY THEORY & CRITICISM



**Formalism:** the *TEXT* (as art)

**Structuralism:** the *TEXT* (as language system)

**Psychoanalytic:** *AUTHOR/READER/text*

**Reader Response:** *READER/TEXT/community of readers w/shared values*

**Gender Studies:** *WORLD/author/text/reader*

**Postcolonial:** *AUTHOR/world/text/reader*

**Marxist:** *WORLD/text*

**Territorial:** *TEXT/[ ( ) reader/ author/world]*



# Understanding the Map

- \* The **work itself** is placed in the center because all approaches must deal, to some extent or another, with the text itself.
- \* **Formalism** and **deconstruction** are placed here also because they deal primarily with the text and not with any of the outside considerations such as author, the real world, audience, or other literature. Meaning, formalists argue, is inherent in the text. Because meaning is determinant, all other considerations are irrelevant.
- \* **Deconstructionists** also subject texts to careful, formal analysis; however, they reach an opposite conclusion: there is no meaning in language.

# Cont'd ...

- \* A **historical** approach relies heavily on the author and his world. In the historical view, it is important to understand the author and his world in order to understand his intent and to make sense of his work. In this view, the work is informed by the author's beliefs, prejudices, time, and history, and to fully understand the work, we must understand the author and his age.
- \* An **intertextual** approach is concerned with comparing the work in question to other literature, to get a broader picture.
- \* **Reader-Response** is concerned with how the work is viewed by the audience. In this approach, the reader creates meaning, not the author or the work.

# Cont'd ...

- \* **Mimetic** criticism seeks to see how well a work accords with the real world (is it accurate? correct? moral? ).
- \* Then, beyond the real world are approaches dealing with the spiritual and the **symbolic**--the images connecting people throughout time and cultures (**archetypes**). This is mimetic in a sense too, but the congruency looked for is not so much with the real world as with something beyond the real world--something tying in all the worlds/times/cultures inhabited by humans.

# Cont'd ...

- \* The **Psychological** approach is placed outside these poles because it can fit in many places, depending how it is applied:
  - (1) **Historical** if diagnosing the author himself
  - (2) **Mimetic** if considering if characters are acting by "real world" standards and with recognizable psychological motivations
  - (3) **Archetypal** when the idea of the Jungian collective unconscious is included
  - (4) **Reader-Response** when the psychology of the reader--why he sees what he sees in the text--is examined.

# Cont'd ...

- \* Likewise, **Feminist, Minority, Marxist**, and other such approaches may fit in:
  - (1) **Historical** if the author's attitudes are being examined in relation to his times (i.e. was Shakespeare a feminist for his times, though he might not be considered so today?)
  - (2) **Mimetic**--when asking how well characters accord with the real world. Does a black character act like a black person would, or is he a stereotype? Are women being portrayed accurately? Does the work show a realistic economic picture of the world?

# There are so many possible answers

...

What does this literary work mean?

- \* Different approaches or lenses help us to discover rich and deeper meaning
- \* Each lens has its strengths and weaknesses
- \* Each lens is valuable
- \* Try to become a pluralist rather than an inflexible supporter of one

# Types of Literary Theory

# Formalism

- \* Has the advantage of forcing writers to evaluate a work on its own terms rather than to rely on “accepted” notions of the writer’s work
- \* Works best when applied to poetry and short fiction.

# Formalism

- \* Attempts to discover meaning by close reading of a work of literature. Focus is on:
  - \* Form, organization, and structure
  - \* Word choice and language
  - \* Multiple meanings
- \* Considers the work in isolation, disregarding author's intent, author's background, context, and anything else outside of the work itself.

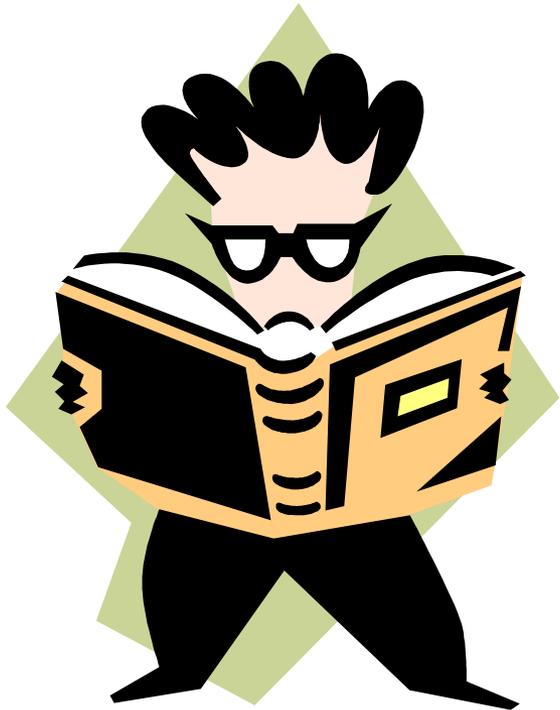
# Formalism/New Criticism

- \* The formalist movement began in England with the publication of I.A. Richards' Practical Criticism (1929).
- \* American critics (such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks) adapted formalism and termed their adaptation “New Criticism.”

# Formalism/New Criticism

- \* New Criticism varied from formalism in that New Criticism focuses on image, symbol, and meaning. Traditional formalists often attacked New Critics for their lack of attention to the form of the work.
- \* Seminal works on New Criticism include John Crowe Ransom's The New Criticism (1941) and Cleanth Brooks' The Well Wrought Urn (1947).

# NEW CRITICISM



- \* Meaning resides in the text—not in reader, author, or world
- \* Texts may contain numerous messages, but must have a unifying central theme created by the perfect union of all artistic elements.
- \* Texts are artistic creations
- \* Close reading is the basis of new critical analysis
- \* The methodology for finding meaning is clear-cut; the tools are unique to literary analysis

\*one type of **formalism**

# Impact of Formalism

Today, few critics adhere only to the formalist or New Criticism theory. However, its back-to-the-basics approach pervades many other critical theories.

# Reader-Response Criticism

- \* Sees the reader as essential to the interpretation of a work.
  - \* Each reader is unique, with different educations, experiences, moral values, opinions, tastes, etc.
  - \* Therefore, each reader's interaction with a work is unique.
- \* Analyzes the features of the text that shape and guide a reader's reading.
- \* Emphasizes recursive reading—rereading for new interpretations.

# Reader-Response Criticism

- \* Reader-response theory has been criticized as being overly impressionistic and guilty of the affective fallacy (too focused on the emotional effect of the work). Less tactful critics have plainly said that it is not intellectual.
- \* These attacks resulted in an adaptation of reader-response criticism called reception theory.

# READER RESPONSE



Text has many interpretations—text & reader interact to create meaning

Meaning ultimately resides in the reader's mind or the consensual "mind" of a community of readers (this class, for example)



A text's truth is relative

Readers may reach the same conclusions about a work--but approach the task quite differently

# Reader-Response/Reception Theory

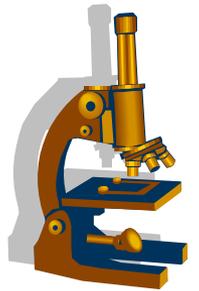
Reception theory is applied to the general reading public rather than an individual reader.

- \* Each generation has different experiences, values, issues, etc.
- \* Therefore, each generation will read a work differently.

# STRUCTURALISM



- \* Meaning resides in the structure of language, not in art nor in the reader's mind
- \* Scientific approach to literary analysis:  
structure of language as a logical sign system  
determines meaning
- \* Two levels of language: *langue* (“the King’s English”) & *parole* (everyday speech)
- \* Interpret a text or part of a text by taking its language apart (study word derivations, sentence syntax, etc.)



# Biographical Criticism

- \* Analyzes an author's life in regard to their work
- \* Can enhance the understanding of a work
- \* Must be used carefully—example: Kate Chopin

# Sociological Criticism

Maintains that the literary work cannot be separated from the social context in which it was created. In general, sociological criticism examines one of these two aspects:

- \* Conditions of production, such as schools, magazines, publishers, and fashions.
- \* The applicability of a given work—fiction especially—in studying the dynamics of a given society.

# Types of Sociological Criticism

Sociological theory is so broad that it can be subdivided in many different categories. Two dominant theories we'll study are

- \* Feminist criticism
- \* Marxist criticism

# Feminist Criticism

- \* Feminist criticism grew out of the women's movement that followed World War II.
- \* Feminist critics analyze the role of gender in works of literature. Leading critic Elaine Showalter describes two purposes of feminist criticism:
  - \* Feminist critique: The analysis of works by male authors, especially in the depiction of women's writing
  - \* Gynocriticism: The study of women's writing

# Feminist Criticism

Feminist critics have been responsible for recovering neglected works by women authors through the ages and creating a canon of women's writing.

A case in point is Kate Chopin. She was fairly widely published in the 1890s, but her work was largely neglected by literary critics until the 1960s, when Chopin was “rediscovered” by feminist critics.

# FEMINIST CRITICISM

- **Meaning is socially constructed.**
- **Texts have more than one interpretation**
- **Texts are commodities (products of society)**
- **Truth is relative, highly dependent on arbitrary categories of difference, esp. those based on “sex” and “gender”**

**Look for systems of containment; for evidence of repression, oppression, suppression, subversion, & rebellion in texts by women; study women’s unique ways of understanding and writing about the human condition.**



# Marxist Criticism

- \* Marxist criticism is based on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Their beliefs include the following:
  - \* Value is based on labor.
  - \* The working class will eventually overthrow the capitalist middle class.
  - \* In the meantime, the middle class exploits the working class.
  - \* Most institutions—religious, legal, educational, and governmental—are corrupted by middle-class capitalists.

# Marxist Criticism

- \* Marxist critics apply these economic and social theories to literature by analyzing:
  - \* Ideologies that support the elite and place the working class at a disadvantage
  - \* Class conflict
- \* Marxism strongly influenced fiction, particularly American fiction, in the 1930s.

# New Historicism

- \* New historicist critics view literature as part of history, and furthermore, as an expression of forces on history.
- \* New historicism compares literary analysis to a dynamic circle:
  - \* The work tells us something about the surrounding ideology (slavery, rights of women, etc.)
  - \* Study of the ideology tells us something about the work.

# New Historicism

- \* New historicism takes two forms:
  - \* Analysis of the work in the context in which it was created
  - \* Analysis of the work in the context in which it was critically evaluated.
- \* New historicists assert that literature “does not exist outside time and place and cannot be interpreted without reference to the era in which it was written” (Kirszner and Mandell 2038).

# New Historicism

- \* Readers are influenced by their culture, so no objective reading of a work is possible.
- \* Critics should consider how their own culture affects their interpretation of the historical influence on a work.

# NEW HISTORICISM



- \* Literature is one among many socially constructed texts. If there is a difference, it's the intentional use of the imagination to convey ideas.
- \* History is every bit as subjective as intentionally imaginative texts
- \* Purpose of analyzing literature is to locate hidden social messages, especially those that promote oppression.
- \* Texts have no final interpretation
- \* Language, though socially constructed, is stable enough to be useful.
- \* Find a small intriguing or odd piece of the text and interpret it by comparing it to contemporary sign systems—magazines, newspapers, fads, laws. Try to locate uses & abuses of power.

# Psychoanalytic Criticism

- \* Analyzes literature to reveal insights about the way the human mind works.
- \* Is based on the work of Sigmund Freud and his disciples.
- \* Works well as a method of analyzing characters' actions and motivations.

# Basic Freudian Concepts

- \* All actions are influenced by the unconscious.
- \* Human beings must repress many of their desires to live peacefully with others.
- \* Repressed desires often surface in the unconscious, motivating actions.

# Basic Freudian Concepts

- \* The mind has three major areas of activity:
  - \* Id: Area in the unconscious that works for gratification through the pleasure principle
  - \* Superego: An internal censor bringing social pressures to bear on the id.
  - \* Ego: Area in the consciousness that mediates among demands of social pressure, the id, and the superego.

# Mythological Approach

- \* Largely attributed to Carl Jung, a disciple of Sigmund Freud
- \* Archetype: a model or pattern from which all other things of a similar nature are made

# Mythological Approach

- \* Collective Unconscious--there are certain basic and central images and experiences that are inherent in the human psyche
- \* Analyzes what in a work evokes a similar response in people, regardless of culture
- \* Concerned with enduring patterns and how they are reflected in literature

# Examples of Archetypes

## Common Themes:

- \* Stories of quest and initiation
- \* Descents into the underworld
- \* Ascents into heaven
- \* Search for father/mother
- \* Fall from innocence

# Examples of Archetypes

## Characters:

- \* Scapegoat
- \* Hero/Villian
- \* Outcast
- \* Temptress
- \* Mother/Father
- \* Mentor