New Lenses to See, Experience, and Understand Literature
“Big Questions” about Literature

- What are the influences on how we read, interpret, and understand a text?
- How do we come to interpret a novel, poem, play, or story?
- Literary Theories/Critical Theories are approaches to answer some of these questions.
The Basic Idea

- The point of criticism is to argue your point of view on a work of literature.
- You do have to analyze a text and support your assertions with specific evidence from the text (and in college, from scholars).
- It’s crucial to go beyond plot development and into more abstract, higher-level thinking like theme, tone, purpose, etc.
The Basic Idea

• A critical analysis is an in-depth examination of some aspect of the literary work
• You may examine any element of the text: character development, conflicts, narrative point of view, etc.
• Literary critical theories inform us of certain ways to approach big ideas in the novel.
IMAGINE LITERARY THEORY AS A PAIR OF LENSES THROUGH WHICH YOU VIEW THE TEXT YOU ARE READING.
CRITICAL APPROACHES PRIMER

- Biographical
- New Historicism
- Formalism
- Psychological - Freud
- Archetypal - Jung
- Feminist
- Marxist
- Postcolonial Theory
- Reader Response
Lit Theory = Critical Theory*

(*kinda, not really, though*)
Remember Cinderella?

In a far away, long ago kingdom, Cinderella is living happily with her mother and father until her mother dies. Cinderella's father remarries a cold, cruel woman who has two daughters. When the father dies, Cinderella's wicked stepmother turns her into a servant in her own house. Meanwhile, across town in the castle, the King determines that his son the Prince should find a suitable bride and provide him with a required number of grandchildren. So the King invites every eligible maiden in the kingdom to a fancy dress ball, where his son will be able to choose his bride. Cinderella has no suitable party dress for a ball, but her friends (the mice and the birds) lend a hand in making her one, a dress the evil stepsisters immediately tear apart on the evening of the ball. At this point, enter the Fairy Godmother, the pumpkin carriage, the royal ball, the stroke of midnight, the glass slipper, and the rest, as they say, is fairy tale history.
1. Biographical Criticism

- views literature as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times).
- it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times in order to truly understand his works.
Biographical Approach

Advantages:

- works well for some which are obviously political or biographical in nature.
- places allusions in their proper classical, political, or biblical background.

Disadvantages:

- "the intentional fallacy" - assuming we can know the intent, thoughts, purposes of the author
- tends to reduce art to the level of biography and make it relative (to the times) rather than universal.
2. New Historicist Criticism

- 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” (Kirschner and Mandell 2038).
So, why the “New” in Historicism?

- Traditional (or “Old”) historicism is, by its nature, a subjective narrative, usually told from the point of view of the powerful, the “winners.”
- The “losers” of history do not have the means to write their stories, nor is there usually an audience interested in hearing them. Most cultures, once dominated by another, are forced to forget their past.
- Literature, especially, gives subjective voice to the oppressed. (e.g.: slave narratives)
Cinderella

- What can we infer about the society in which this story—considering, especially, the violence and vengeance in the Grimm version—would evolve and be told to young children?

- What can we infer about property and inheritance laws in the society in which “Cinderella” evolved? What can we infer about the society’s view of royalty and monarchic power?
3. Formalism / New Criticism

- involves a close reading of the text
- all information essential to the interpretation of a work must be found within the work itself
- focuses on analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor
- also interested in the work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.
- no need to bring in outside information about the history, politics, or society of the time, or about the author's life
Formalism / New Criticism

Advantages:
- can be performed without much research
- emphasizes the value of literature apart from its context
- virtually all critical approaches must begin here

Disadvantages:
- text is seen in isolation
- ignores the context of the work
- cannot account for allusions
Cinderella

- Look for symbolic, or some other, significance for the specific items and animals chosen (for the coach and staff) and/or the numbers of each chosen.
- Compare the speech patterns of Cinderella and the stepmother and stepsisters. Are there noticeable differences in cadence? Do any use more (or less) figurative or poetic language than the others? Do any speak noticeably more (or less) than the others?
- Are there any internal ironies or inconsistencies that render the work disunified?
4. Psychological Criticism

- views works through the lens of psychology
- looks either at the psychological motivations of the characters or of the authors themselves
- most frequently applies Freudian psychology to works, but other approaches also exist.
Freudian Approach to Personality

Three parts to an individual’s psyche:

- **the id**: the instinctual, pleasure seeking part of the mind
- **the ego**: the part of the mind that controls but does not repress the id's impulses, releasing them in a healthy way
- **the superego**: the part of the mind that represses the id's impulses
Freudian Drives

Freud believed that much human behavior is motivated by sexuality

- **Oedipus complex**: a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother

- **Electra complex**: a girl's unconscious rivalry with her mother for the love of her father
Cinderella VS
Psychoanalytical Approach

Advantages:
- can be a useful tool for understanding character development and conflict

Disadvantages:
- can turn a work into a psychological case study
- tends to see sex in everything, exaggerating this aspect of literature
- some works do not lend themselves readily to this approach.
5. Archetypal/Mythological Criticism

- Assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. archetypes) that evokes basically the same response in all people
- Identifies these patterns and discusses how they function in the works
- Asserts that these archetypes are the source of much of literature's power.
Archetypal Approach

- based on the theories of psychologist Carl Jung
- he states that mankind possesses a "collective unconscious" that contains these archetypes and that is common to all of humanity
Some Archetypes

- archetypal women - the Good Wife/Mother, the Terrible Mother, the Virgin (often a Damsel in Distress), and the Fallen Woman.
- water - creation, birth-death-resurrection, purification, redemption, fertility, growth
- garden - paradise (Eden), innocence, fertility
- desert - spiritual emptiness, death, hopelessness
- red - blood, sacrifice, passion, disorder
- green - growth, fertility
- black - chaos, death, evil
- serpent - evil, sensuality, mystery, wisdom, destruction
- seven - perfection
- hero archetype - The hero is involved in a quest (in which he overcomes obstacles). He experiences initiation (involving a separation, transformation, and return), and finally he serves as a scapegoat, that is, he dies to atone.
Archetypal Approach

Advantages:
• provides a universalistic approach to literature and identifies a reason why certain literature may survive the test of time
• it works well with works that are highly symbolic

Disadvantages:
• literature may become a vehicle for archetypes
• can easily become a list of symbols without much analysis
A Riddle

- A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies at the scene and the son is rushed to the hospital. At the hospital the surgeon looks at the boy and says "I can't operate on this boy, he is my son" .... How can this be?
The surgeon is the child’s mother

- What does this simple riddle reveal about our assumptions regarding gender?
6. Feminist/Gender Criticism

- ...the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women
- Role of women in the literary work; representations of women
- Power structures between men and women
- The female/feminine experience
Some common considerations for feminist/gender critics

- Patriarchal ideologies and its effects on women (and men)
- While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine)
  - (Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*)
- Sex and gender equality
- Stereotypical representations of gender
- Marginalization
The Bechdel test asks if a work of fiction (literature, drama, film, etc.) features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. The requirement that the two women must be named is sometimes added.
Hermeneutics of Suspicion

- A popular mode of critical discourse in today’s academy is that of suspicion, or critique
- When we critique a text, we find underlying problems or inconsistencies in its message
- Feminist scholars are often write critiques of literature and culture that reveal problematic ideologies like patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, etc.
Cinderella

- Consider the misogynist theme of abused-girl-waiting-to-be-rescued-by-prince.
  - Can Cinderella save herself? Why in need of man? Can’t woman exist independent of man?
- Consider the values conveyed in the portrayal of the “good girl” as physically beautiful and the “wicked girls” as physically ugly
  - Are women only valuable to men as sexualized objects?
7. Marxist Criticism

- Karl Marx perceived human history to have consisted of a series of struggles between classes—between the oppressed and the oppressing ("the haves" and "the have-nots").

- Marx thought that materialism was the ultimate driving force in history
Marxist Approach

- Focus on the **ideological** content of a work
  - Explicit and implicit assumptions and values about race, culture, class, and power
- Texts are political in nature, responding to larger social and **material** constructs
  - Material, not psychological
Marxist Approach

- Marxist criticism examines the nature of power structures within a novel.
- A Marxist critic asks questions like:
  - Who has power? Who lacks power?
  - What is the relationship between power and wealth?
  - Who is exploited by whom and why?
  - How does power remain constant or shift throughout a work of literature?
  - What makes certain characters powerful or powerless?
The Itsy Bitsy Spider: An Analysis.

THE SPIDER: The spider symbolizes the proletariat, and his ongoing struggle against the bourgeoisie.

THE WATERSPOUT: The waterspout is the myth of equality and the American Dream. The spider continues to doggedly scale its heights, only to be denied the fruits of his hard work.

THE RAIN: The rain is the bourgeoisie, impeding the progress of the spider, and standing between him and his ultimate goal of true freedom and equality. The rain also embodies man's inhumanity to man.

THE SUN: The sun is the easing of difficult living and working conditions. It provides false hope for the spider, prolonging his struggle.

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Marxist Approach

- It also examines commodities, possessions that give power
- Typical commodities are things like land and money but can also be things like social position, knowledge, or even a person
- Marxist criticism can also examine what commodities bring power and why within a work of literature
- Suspicion – Marxist scholars will seek to find problems relating to capitalism, wealth inequality, class struggle, etc.
Cinderella

- Consider Cinderella as a representative of the proletariat:
  - oppressed by her bourgeois stepmother and stepsisters, who have stolen her rightful inheritance and turned her into a servant in her own home;
  - desiring to join the ranks of the bourgeoisie by marrying the prince.
8. Postcolonial Theory

- focuses on the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries. The literature is composed of colonizing countries that deals with colonization or colonized peoples.

- Greatly interested in the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized, postcolonial theory seeks to critically investigate what happens when two cultures clash and one of them ideologically fashions itself as superior and assumes dominance and control over the other.

- Depends on historical understanding of time and place.

- What colonizer-colonized relationships have we seen in history?
Recently* Colonized Geographies

- Latin America
- Africa
- East and Southeast Asia
- South Asia
- Caribbean
- Polynesia
- United States
History is Written by the Victors

- What happens during and after colonization?
  - what language do you speak?
  - what culture do you follow?
- Hybridization – mixing of cultures (British and Indian coming together and melding)
- Double Consciousness – holding two distinct cultures simultaneously (being under British rule while still practicing Indian cultural norms)
- Race/Ethnicity – who defines power structures along race and ethnicity?
Application

- Cinderella as conquered individual, under the tyrannical rule of stepmother (unnatural maternal figure who “invades” the family)
- Undemocratically elected prince continues to build riches on the backs of colonized paupers. The only way Cinderella can escape poverty is playing the monarchy game.
Better Applications of Postcolonial Theory
9. Reader Response Criticism

- analyzes the reader's role in the production of meaning
- lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from formalism
- the text itself has no meaning until it is read by a reader
- The reader creates the meaning.
- can take into account the strategies employed by the author to elicit a certain response from readers
- denies the possibility that works are universal (i.e. that they will always mean more or less the same thing to readers everywhere)
Reader Response Criticism

Advantages:
- recognizes that different people view works differently and that people's interpretations change over time.

Disadvantages:
- tends to make interpretation too subjective
- does not provide adequate criteria for evaluating one reading in comparison to another
Cinderella

- How is the reader/audience meant to feel when Cinderella finally wins over the Prince?
- Who is the most sympathetic character of the film? Why are we drawn to these characters?
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  - Social/Political
  - Cultural
- Psychological - Freud
- Mythological and Archetypal - Jung
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- Reader Response

AP EXAM Questions 1 & 2 (poetry and prose analysis)
Also helpful for Question 3 (open-ended)
So, what’s the point?

- These approaches help us to pay attention to some details in new and varied ways.
  - How does *Gatsby* (1925) anticipate the Stock Market crash of 1929? Why is it significant that Gatsby is a bootlegger?

- These theories can help us investigate deeper themes or problems of the text we’re studying.
  - e.g. Does Daisy represent progress for women in *Gatsby*? What is the problem if she doesn’t?
  - e.g. Why is it significant that George (working class) kills Gatsby (upper class)? Does the fact that he mistakenly identifies Gatsby as the killer have any *allegorical* meaning?
For questions posed by each theory,

REFER TO PAGES 1565-1567 OF BEDFORD TEXTBOOK
Select a theory and write a few critical statements about *The Lion King* from that perspective.

Formalism/New Criticism
New Historicism
Biographical
Psychological (Archetypes or Freud)
Feminist/Gender
Marxist
Postcolonial
Reader Response

(Simba/Hamlet)