

# What Is Critical Theory?

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English 3900

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# Criticism and Interpretation

- ★ Criticism is the act analyzing, evaluating, and judging the quality of a literary or artistic work.
- ★ Interpretation is explanation, explication, elucidation.
  - ★ Interpretation is the act of finding meaning in a work of art or literature.
- ★ Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, originally the Bible, but now broadly defined to art and literature.
  - ★ Hermeneutics is interpretive theory.

# Theory

- ★ “A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena” (*Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*)
- ★ A proposed explanation
- ★ A system of rules, principles, and methods of art, as distinguished from practice
- ★ Theory is the act of contemplating disciplinary systems methodologically.



# Literary Criticism vs Literary Theory

- ★ Literary criticism is a particular act of interpretation of a text.
  - ★ Literary criticism explains the text.
- ★ Literary theory is a hermeneutical method that proposes principles of textual analysis.
  - ★ Literary theory is *the* system that underpins a particular practice of criticism; literary theory systematizes literary criticism.

# Critical Theory

- ★ Critical theory, as opposed to specifically literary theory, embodies the methodological analysis of culture in general. Literary analysis is one component of a larger analysis of media, politics and ideology, socio-economic positions, and other subjectifying apparatuses.
- ★ Because the theories we're learning about can be applied across disciplines (not just interpreting literature), I will refer to them as types of critical theory.



# What We Will Cover

- ★ New Criticism (and Russian Formalism), close reading of the text itself, paying particular heed to its unifying tensions and analysis of internal form.
- ★ Structuralism (and Semiotics and Narratology), the analysis of signs and codes within linguistic systems

# What We Will Cover

Concluded

- ★ Post-Structuralism (and Deconstruction and Post-Modernism), the analysis of a text's plays, slippages, and aporias of meaning
- ★ Psychoanalysis, the analysis of the psyche of the author, text, and culture
- ★ Marxism (and Cultural Studies), socio-economic historical and cultural analyses



# What We May Cover

Based on Student Group Selections

- ★ Cognitive Criticism, analyses of literature from the perspective of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology
- ★ Existentialism and Phenomenology, examines the self-conscious subjectivity and free choice of characters, creative writing as meaningful action, and the being of the literary work in the world.
- ★ Reader-Response Criticism, analyses based on the transactional, affective, subjective relationship between author, text, and reader.



# What We May Cover

Continued

- ★ **Feminism and Gender Studies**, analyses based on the the agency of women in the patriarchy as well as socially constructed gender identity.
- ★ **Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Theory**, analyses of the politics and poetics, consciousness and unconsciousness of (queer) sexuality and identity.
- ★ **African American Criticism**, analyses of African American (literary/aesthetic) history and heritage and the social construction of racial identity.

# What We May Cover

Concluded

- ★ Postcolonialism, analyses of colonial ideology (oppression and othering) and postcolonial resistance.
- ★ Ecocriticism, analyses of literature from the ecological, environmental, and natural perspective.



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# **(Liberal Humanism) New Criticism (And Russian Formalism)**

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# Liberal Humanism

- ★ Before the rise of theory in the 1970s, the study of literature was non-political and non-theoretical.
- ★ Now, those who study literature and espouse neither a political (Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, etc.) nor a theoretical (poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, reader-response, etc.) critical approach are called liberal humanists.

# Liberal Humanism

## Tenets

- ★ Literature is timeless and significant,
- ★ Transcending socio-political, literary-historical, and autobiographical context,
- ★ Thereby necessitating close reading in isolation,
- ★ In order to determine the transcendental meaning of the text, which coincides with some essential aspect of human nature,
- ★ Determined by interpreting the meaning of the text's characters, who are individuals, i.e., transcendent subjects.



# Liberal Humanism

Tenets, concluded

- ★ Literature enhances life
- ★ By unifying literary form with the content of human values
- ★ In a sincere, authentic manner
- ★ That shows rather than tells,
- ★ Thereby requiring a literary critic to mediate between the text and the reader.

# New Criticism

- ★ Influenced by I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis's practical criticism,
- ★ Eschews philological, biographical, and historical criticism
- ★ Strives to create an objective, formalist criticism that finds meaning in “the text itself”
- ★ Advocates close reading that analyzes tension and complexity of formal structure and meaning via ambiguity, irony, and paradox
- ★ Resolves tensions of text into harmonious organic unity that engenders a universal theme



# Russian Formalism

- ★ Considers the text to be an autonomous object.
- ★ Studies literary (as opposed to practical or conventional) language and the internal operations of works of literature, be they either narrative form in fiction or sound structure in poetry.
- ★ Literature evolves not because of external history but through revolutions of literary language.



# The Relationship

Between Liberal Humanism, New Criticism,  
and Russian Formalism

- ★ Liberal Humanism values literature as timeless and transcendent; New Criticism constitutes the formalization and systematization of this in America during the 1930s and 1940s against the backdrop of non-political, non-theoretical liberal humanism; and Russian Formalism of the 1910s to 1930s is American New Criticism's Russian cousin.

# The Question

## That New Critics Pose

- ★ What single interpretation of the text best establishes its organic unity? In other words, how do the text's formal elements, and the multiple meanings those elements produce, all work together to support the theme, or overall meaning, of the work? Remember, a great work will have a theme of universal human significance. (Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today* 150)



# T. S. Eliot

- ★ *Technically, Eliot is not a New Critic, but he is considered a chief influence*
- ★ Tradition: the individual poet/poem must be considered within the context of literary history
- ★ Impersonality/Depersonalization: the poet/poem does not express a romantic self/feeling, but rather builds on ideas within the tradition
- ★ Dissociation of Sensibility: poetry should not sever thought from feeling, but rather constitute a complex analysis of thought united with feeling



# John Crowe Ransom

New Critic

- ★ “Criticism, Inc.”: the scientific and systematic “business of criticism”
- ★ Aesthetic distance: the poet should write with a certain objective, critical detachment, akin to Eliot’s impersonality

# Cleanth Brooks

## New Critic

- ★ Heresy of paraphrase: paraphrasing the poem violates the meaning of the poem
- ★ Organic unity: the poem is an harmonic whole
- ★ Irony: general incongruity of forces within the poem

# Cleanth Brooks

## Continued

- ★ Paradox: the poem makes contradictory statements that are harmonized into a whole
- ★ Ambiguity: multiplicity of connotive meaning
- ★ “Form is content”: the structure of the poem is part of the meaning of the poem



# **William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley**

## **New Critics**

- ★ **Intentional fallacy: the error of taking the author's intent for the meaning of the work**
- ★ **Affective fallacy: the error of taking a work's emotional effect for its meaning**
- ★ **Affective criticism: criticism that romantically looks at psychological effects of the work**
- ★ **Cognitive criticism: criticism that classically and objectively looks at the work**

# Boris Eichenbaum

Russian Formalist

- ★ **Poetic Sound:** Formalism distinguishes conventional, practical language from autonomous, literary language.
- ★ **Literary Devices:** Formalism emphasizes the techniques of fiction (plot and structure) and poetry (meter, rhythm) and analyze how they form-ally function within the work.
- ★ **Literary Evolution:** Literature changes as forms change.



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# Structuralism

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# Theory

Structuralism is a multidisciplinary endeavor, particularly in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary studies, that seeks to determine how surface phenomena such as linguistic signs, social norms, and literary conventions are tied to an underlying, governing system, which itself corresponds to the organizing systems of the human mind. Structuralism is a human, social science.

# Structure

- ★ A structure is a whole system, complete unto itself with internal regulations that provide stability yet allow for transformation of the system.
- ★ Examples of structures include language or sign systems, mating rituals, and narrative conventions.



# Structural Linguistics

- ★ Founded by Ferdinand de Saussure, structural linguistics theorizes that an arbitrary, relational, and differential system of language mediates the human mind's experience of the world.
- ★ According to Saussure, semiology is “a science that studies the life of signs within society” and “linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology.”
- ★ The human mind creates language as a system to organize world.

# Structural Anthropology

- ★ Founded by Claude Lévi-Strauss, structural anthropology looks at the codes of social life.
- ★ Lévi-Strauss in particular looked at cultural myths, called mythemes, that transcend cultures, and therefore suggests a common human experience of, for instance, ritual codes and incest taboos.

# Practice

## Four Kinds of Structuralist Criticism

- ★ I) Semiotics: While semiology is the science of sciences, semiotics is the practice of analyzing sign systems--not just language, but objects, images, and behaviors--in literary and media studies of film, television, and pop culture, for example, Barthes' study of wrestling or soap ads



# Practice

## Genre Criticism

- ★2) Genre Criticism (also known as Myth or Archetypal Criticism): Classifies the structure and grammar of literary genres, for example, Northrup Frye's archetypes, mythos, and quests as well as Vladimir Propp's morphology of fairy tale actions and spheres of actions;

# Practice

## Narratology

- ★3) Narratology (also known as Narrative Theory): Analyzes the grammar, patterns, and formulas of narrative, for example, Aristotle's hamartia, anagorisis, and peripeteia; Vladimir Propp's morphology of fairy tale functions and spheres of actions (overlaps with genre criticism); and Gérard Genette's classification of the storytelling processes

# Practice

## Interpretive Conventions

- ★4) Interpretive Conventions: Analyzes the codes and conventions of reading and interpreting literature, for example, Jonathan Culler's literary competence and interpretive communities



# Practice

## Comparing the Interpretive Practices

- ★ Whereas New Criticism and Russian Formalism look at *what* a text means in terms of the relationship between form and content,
- ★ Structuralist criticism looks at *how* a text means in terms of an underlying system, be it literary writing or reading convention.
- ★ Structuralism does not evaluate meaning or theme, it analyzes the structures that undergird the work and our understanding of it.

# Questions

## Structuralists Pose

- ★ . . . how should the text be classified in terms of its genre?
- ★ . . . analyze the text's narrative operations. Can you speculate about the relationship between the text's "grammar" and that of similar texts?
- ★ . . . what rules or codes of interpretation must be internalized in order to "make sense" of the text?



# Questions

Concluded

- ★ What are the semiotics of a given category of cultural phenomena, or “texts,” such as high school football games, television and/or magazine ads for a particular brand of perfume (or any other consumer product), or even media coverage of a historical event, such as Operation Desert Storm, an important legal case, or a presidential election campaign?...analyze the nonverbal messages sent by the “texts” . . . .  
What is being communicated, and how exactly is it being communicated? (Lois Tyson *Today* 233)



# Theorists

- ★ Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralist linguist
- ★ Roman Jakobson, structuralist linguist
- ★ Northrop Frye, archetypal and genre criticism
- ★ Tzvetan Todorov, narratologist
- ★ Roland Barthes, semiotician

# Ferdinand de Saussure

★As a structural linguist, Saussure theorizes that a signifier (sound or image) is only arbitrarily and conventionally related to a signified concept. Language is a structure of mind that does not convey positivist reality, but rather evokes relational value. Meaning exists in difference.

# Roman Jakobson

★ Jakobson applies Saussure's ideas of synchrony (freeze frame of the system) and diachrony (slow change) to literary studies and argues that the structure of a work depends on its function. He differentiates the referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic functions, stating that the poetic function performs the message for its own sake and the verbal artwork is a complex, overdetermined structure whose signs are palpable.



# Northrop Frye

★As a genre, myth, and archetypal critic, Frye looks for the central informing powers, i.e., myths or archetypes, that underlie all literature and finds them in the heroic quest and the seasonal cycles. He categorizes literary genres according to the seasons: spring romance, summer comedy, autumn tragedy, and winter satire. Rather than making value judgments about literature, Frye simply finds patterns, systematic structures.

# Tzvetan Todorov

★As a narratologist, Todorov considers New Criticism to be internal to the work and Marxism/Psychoanalysis to be external; however, structuralist criticism is neither internal nor external because its object is literary discourse rather than particular literary texts. His narrative analysis finds structural patterns that underly large groups of texts.

# Roland Barthes

- ★ As a semiotician, Barthes does semiotic readings of such things as soap ads and campaign photos.
- ★ Argues that the idea of a modern author (an individual with a single voice to express through her mastery of language) is dead because the codes and conventions of language and literature master the writer.



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# Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, and Postmodernism

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# Roland Barthes

Structuralist, Semiotician

- ★ In *Mythologies*, does semiotic readings of such things as soap ads and campaign photos.
- ★ In “The Death of the Author,” argues that the idea of a modern author (an individual with a single voice to express through her mastery of language) is dead because the codes of language master and the conventions of literary discourse overpower the writer.



# Roland Barthes

Poststructuralist

★ In “From Work to Text,” differentiates between thinking of a literary object as a relatively self-contained literary work that is built by an author (the “father”) on underlying structural(ist) patterns, on the one hand, and conceiving of literature as a field of texts always already in process, part of a playful and active discursive movement without origin or end, on the other.

# From Structuralism To Poststructuralism

- ★ Whereas structuralism valorized only the underlying system and codes of literature while decidedly excommunicating the writer, the reader, and meaning from the literary process,
- ★ Poststructuralism seeks the destruction of codes, systems, and structures in order to find a place for the writer, the reader, and the meaning of the text.

# Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

★ Like structuralism, poststructuralism is interdisciplinary. In terms of what we have studied or will study, Derridian deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Foucaultian New Historicism are versions of poststructuralism.



# Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

- ★ Structuralism and poststructuralism differ in three key areas:
  - ★ The underlying structure,
  - ★ Identity,
  - ★ And literary criticism.

# The Underlying Structure

- ★ Structuralism analyzes the freeze-frame of the underlying system.
- ★ Poststructuralism analyzes language in motion, the social context of codes: unfrozen, in human history, and reintegrated into time.
  - ★ Lacan's metonymy of desire (psychoanalysis)
  - ★ Derrida's différance (deconstruction)
  - ★ Foucault's discontinuous history (New Historicism)

# Identity

- ★ Structuralism discusses the system only, not individual authors and not individual people.
- ★ The author is dead, replaced by myths and archetypes and the structural analysis of narrative.
- ★ The individual is nil, superceded by the discursive system.
- ★ Poststructuralism witnesses the reemergence of the author and individual, but subjected to language systems.
  - ★ Derrida's decentered subject of discourse
  - ★ Foucault's subject-positions derived from discourse
  - ★ Lacan's subject exists only in relation to the Big Other



# Literary Criticism

- ★ Structuralism analyzes how a text means in terms of underlying systems and structure, such as genres, sign systems, narrative formulas, and interpretive conventions.
- ★ Poststructuralism analyzes the shifting identities of the characters and the purposively playful meaning of the text.

# Poststructuralist Literary Criticism

- ★ Analyze the fluctuating and shifting, non-essential and non-substantial, destabiliz-ed/-ing and performative subject-positions of the characters with respect to the various discursive networks to which they are subject(ed).
- ★ Analyze the paradoxes and the play, the contradictions and the shifts, the undecidability and the aporia of meaning within the text.
- ★ Meaning and “Truth” are suspected, debunked, dispelled, questioned, destabilized, contingent and situated rather than transcendent and absolute.



# Types of Poststructuralism

## Deconstruction and New Historicism

- ★ Deconstruction is one version of poststructuralism, most associated with Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, that shows the play of meanings within the world and the work.
- ★ New Historicism, which we may cover later, is another subset of poststructuralism, most associated with Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, that shows the play of ideological power within individuals subjected to discourse.



# Types of Poststructuralism

## Postmodernism

- ★ Postmodernism, which encompasses both a literary movement and a critical methodology, cares little for Reason, Truth, Progress, and Everyday Reality (Jürgen Habermas); instead values little narratives and decentered subjects over metanarratives and transcendental subjects (Jean-François Lyotard); and deconstructs the image/reality hierarchical binary opposition with the idea of hyperreality (Jean Baudrillard).

# Types of Poststructuralism

## French Poststructuralist Feminism

★ French poststructuralist feminism, as exemplified by Hélène Cixous in her theory of *écriture féminine* (women's writing) blurs the play of the text with the pleasure of the body.

# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Language

- ★ Due to the everyday, practical, and conventional use of language, we think language is a stable structure, but it is actually a slippery, endlessly deferring play of the chain of signifiers that never arrives at the signified, especially in literature.
- ★ Deconstruction attends to the textual ironies and ambiguities valorized by New Criticism, but it does not seek to resolve tensions into an harmonious, universal, meaningful theme.



# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing the World

★ After showing language's instabilities, deconstruction turned to the foundations of being: by deconstructing language, deconstruction disrupts logocentrism, the ground of Western thought. Absolute and transcendental metaphysics give way to decentered and disseminated discourse.

# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Identity

- ★ Just as language and belief are destabilized, so too is identity. There are neither a priori nor innate organizing principles; rather identity is subject to (thus the term “subjectivity”) the decentered, unstable, shifting play of language and discourse systems.
- ★ Deconstruction does not discount structuralism's belief in an underlying system of human thought, but it shows how this system is as playful and prone to slippage as the language/discourse system, which it believes produces subjectivity.



# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Literature

- ★ Deconstruction either 1) analyzes how the meaning of the text is ultimately undecidable because the conflicts and contradictions within the text produce conflicting and contradictory interpretations (again, this method is the exact opposite of how New Critics seek to expose and then resolve the tensions of the text into an organic unity and universal theme). . . .



# Deconstruction

## Deconstructing Literature, continued

- ★2) analyzes how the text paradoxically privileges both terms of the binary oppositions that structure it or, similarly, how the privileged position ceaselessly slips back and forth between terms, without being resolved,
- ★Or 3) does a close reading of the verbal contradictions, finds the textual fault-lines that break the unity of the text, and reveal the linguistic unreliability of the text to mean what it says.

# Postmodernism

Culture, Movement, . . .

- ★ Postmodern culture, inaugurated by the Bomb, encompasses new kinds of wars (cold, culture, drugs, terrorism), multinational late capitalism (the shift from manufacturing to information, networking, and image consumption), and multicultural/identity politics.
- ★ Postmodern literature, the literary movement from the 1960s to the 2000s, emphasizes artifice and irony.

# Postmodernism

... and Criticism

★ Postmodern criticism is a subset of poststructuralism that values suspensive irony and shifting, self-reflexive meaning in postmodern literature and culture.



# Postmodern Literature

## Form

- ★ Experimentation with conventional form is no longer avant-garde and radical, as in modernism, but is now rather normal in postmodernism.
- ★ As postmodern existence becomes eclectic, laissez faire, and hyperreal,
- ★ Postmodern literature loses linearity and coherence and revels in the open and playful and idiosyncratic mixing of forms, genres, disciplines, and systems all within one work. (Modernist collage gives way to postmodernist bricolage.)

# Postmodern Literature

## Representation

- ★ Crisis of representation is a mainstay, as in modernism, but with this twist:
- ★ Postmodernist literature does not believe there is a real 'real' to represent, for everything is an image or text, reality is socially constructed.
- ★ Therefore, postmodernist literature is self-reflective, self-reflexive, and self-conscious.
- ★ It often reveals its own artificiality and textuality in various metafictional and intertextual turns.
- ★ Characters are hybridized or fragmented, shifting or multiplicitous, incohesive or inchoate.



# Postmodern Literature

## High and Low

- ★ There is no battle between high and low, as in modernism.
- ★ Instead, postmodernism blurs boundaries.
  - ★ Just as postmodernist critics write on the elite and the popular culture, postmodernist literature blends high and low forms in a playful dance of arcane and mass consumption. Some would argue that the low is campily sublimated into the high.



# Postmodern Literature

## Subjectivity

- ★ In the postmodern world, there remains no modernist lament over the fragmentation of self and world; nor is there a desire to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.
- ★ Rather, postmodernists revel in socially constructed realities and multiplicitous, shifting subjectivities.
- ★ Any self-cohesion is merely a tentative suturing of signification.
- ★ Postmodern literature thematizes the play of *the* self in *a* constant process of sociocultural construction.

# Postmodern Criticism

- ★ Postmodern literary critics interpret postmodern literature through poststructuralist means,
- ★ Especially literature that exemplifies shifting postmodern identities and the disappearance of reality,
- ★ Utilizes parody, pastiche, and intertextuality to such an extent that external reality falls away,
- ★ Leaving an endless play of irony,
- ★ And blurring the distinction between high and low art.

# Poststructuralist Theorists

- ★ Michel Foucault: New Historicism
- ★ Jacques Derrida: deconstructive philosophy
- ★ Paul de Man: deconstructive literary criticism
- ★ J. L. Austin: philosophy of language
- ★ Judith Butler: gender and performance studies
- ★ Jean Baudrillard: postmodern hyperreality
- ★ Hélène Cixous: écriture féminine



# Michel Foucault

- ★ Michel Foucault represents the New Historical wing of poststructuralism, which examines discontinuous history and subjective power politics.
- ★ After structuralism focused on structure at the expense of authors, Foucault reintegrates the author into literary studies, but with this caveat: the author is a function of discourse.

# Michel Foucault

Continued

★ Foucault argues that the project of the penal school, which trains and disciplines inmates, has been diffused and dissiminated into our culture, thus creating a penal society. Incarceration and behavior modification exist at all levels of society, including various institutions, laws, social networks, and other systems which work together to surveil the citizenry like a panopticon. Identity is produced by, subject to, and surveiled by the structures of the society.

# Michel Foucault

Concluded

★ Foucault theorizes that the repression of sexual language causes a proliferation of sexual language; prohibition paradoxically yields transgressive permissiveness. As subjectivity becomes analyzed and regulated by discourse, a perverse pleasure of power penetrates discourse.



# Jacques Derrida

- ★ Jacques Derrida represents the philosophical deconstruction wing of deconstruction, which unravels metaphysical hierarchies and decenters knowledge of the world.
- ★ Derrida argues that writing defies science because it cannot be measured. Writing is undecidable, exorbitant, and supplemental. Signs, words, and writing exist in question as an unclosable knowledge that renders inconclusive meaning.

# Jacques Derrida

Continued

★ Using a major theme of Plato's *The Phaedrus*, which asserts that writing signals both the absence of the presence of the speaker and the death of truth, Derrida argues that writing constitutes a serious game or play of meaning that subtly supplants signification and exceeds truth in its very dissemination.



# Paul de Man

- ★ Paul de Man represents the literary deconstruction wing of poststructuralism, which unravels binary hierarchies and reveals the indeterminacy of meaning within literary texts.
- ★ De Man aligns semiology with the formal grammar of literature and rhetoric with the figurative, persuasive tropes of literature. He argues that literary texts deconstruct themselves because literary writing pushes the contradiction and conflict between the rhetorical and semiological within itself to the extreme.



# J. L. Austin

★ Building on linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist understanding of *langue* (the system of language) and *parole* (the individual utterance), the poststructuralist Austin argues that performative utterances, rather than describing reality, bring states of being into existence. If our reality consists of rhetorical force, then the binary opposition true/false is effectively deconstructed.

# Judith Butler

- ★ Judith Butler represents the gender and performance studies wing of poststructuralism, which applies Austin's understanding of performative utterances as well as Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power to the performance of gender identity.
- ★ Butler argues that identity is an effect of discursive power, and gender is a performative act, a discourse written on the body first by culture and then by the subject herself.



# Jean Baudrillard

- ★ Jean Baudrillard, in a combination of deconstruction and postmodernism, which unravels the opposition between signifying image and signified reality, argues that postmodern culture renders a state of hyperreality. Baudrillard asserts that we live in a culture of endless mediation, images, and signs, which have neither underlying substance nor referential reality. Instead, only simulacra and simulations exist.



# Hélène Cixous

★ Hélène Cixous, in a version of deconstruction which renders the gender binary a fiction, argues for l'écriture féminine that vibrantly overflows with meaning as it writes beyond the bounds of the phallogocentric machine. The writing of the body liberates the self from the boundaries of symbolic logic.

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# Jacques Derrida From *Of Grammatology*

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# The Playfulness of Language

*Good Morning America*, 16 February 2012

George Stephanopolos: Do you believe that the President is a Christian and citizen?

Michelle Bachman: You have to take the President at his word.

- 1) I do not believe that the President is a Christian and citizen.
- 2) You [GS] have to take President at his word, I [MB] do not.
- 3) You [everyone] have to take the President at his word [because patriotism demands your belief in your President].
- 4) You [not I] have to take the President at his word [because he's not my legitimate President].

# The Playfulness of Language

## Concluded

- 5) I take the President at his word.
- 6) I do not take the President at his word.
- 7) The President's word is truthful.
- 8) The President's word is false.
- 9) No one else can know another person's true, innermost faith because it cannot be spoken in words, therefore I take the President at his word.
- 10) No one else can know another person's true, innermost faith because it cannot be spoken in words, therefore the President's word is meaningless.

Lesson: Conventional language (all language) is both radically playful and utterly ambiguous.

# The Playfulness of Literature

Margaret Atwood's "You Fit into Me"

You fit into me

[Literally, sexual;

Figuratively, expression of intimacy and of love]



# The Playfulness of Literature

Continued

Like a hook into an eye

[Literally, a hook and eye latch;

Figuratively, expression of functionality in the sexual and emotional relationship]

# The Playfulness of Literature

Continued

a fish hook

[Literally, sexual/genital dysfunction;

Figuratively, expression of displeasure, of being painfully emotionally if not violently abusively coupled]

# The Playfulness of Literature

Continued

an open eye

[Literally, sexual penetration;

Figuratively, expression of emotional and/or physical pain]



# The Playfulness of Literature

Concluded

Should the poem be read as a normal relationship falling apart?

Or, should the poem be read as a relationship deteriorating into emotional abuse? Or physical abuse? Or sexual abuse?

Or, should the poem be read as a statement of sexual incompatibility between dysfunctional lovers?

Or, should the poem be read as a general statement about the cycles of love and resentment in any relationship?

# The Deconstruction

## Of Hierarchical Binary Oppositions

Derrida deconstructs hierarchical binary oppositions, i.e., he

- 1) illustrates how one term in the dichotomy is privileged over the other,
- 2) demonstrates how the privileged term is also deprivileged by the other term, which itself is also privileged, and
- 3) explores the perpetually unstable meaning of the binary opposition.

# Deconstruction

Continued

## ★ Derrida deconstructs

- ★ speech/writing via grammatology
- ★ absence/presence via language
- ★ literature/philosophy via literary language
- ★ literature/criticism via deconstruction which is both interpretive method and literary work
- ★ signifier/signified via supplément and différance



# Deconstruction

Concluded

## ★ Derrida deconstructs

- ★ philosophy/nonphilosophy (philosophy vs reality) via exorbitant (there is nothing outside the text)
- ★ cure/poison via the pharmakon
- ★ writing/memory
- ★ alethia-truth/lethia-forgetting
- ★ life/death via the ghost-writer

# Grammatology

## Definition

- ★ **grammatology: the writing of speech**
- ★ **but also the science of writing**
  - ★ **but writing defies science because it can't be measured**
  - ★ **because the undecidability, exorbitance, supplementarity, différence of the signs, words, and writing in question,**
  - ★ **leading to an unclosable knowledge and an inconclusive meaning**
- ★ **grammar is not a closed system as in Saussure's/Frye's versions of linguistic/literary structuralism, but a field of in process textuality as in Barths' "From Work to Text"**

# Exergue

## Definition

★ exergue: the space below the device on a coin or medal, sometimes separated from the field by a line; Derrida uses this to suggest the sliding of the (“inner”) signified meaning beneath the representational line/image of the (“outer”) signifier (1688)



# Exergue

## Quotation

“Perhaps patient meditation and painstaking investigation on and around what is still provisionally called writing, far from falling short of a science of writing or of hastily dismissing it by some obscurantist reaction, letting it rather develop its positivity as far as possible, are the wanders of a way of thinking that is faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself as present, beyond the closure of knowledge. The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.” (1690-1)

# Ethnocentrism

## Definition

★ethnocentrism: We think Western culture is exceptional...because our Western phonetic writing is the most advanced and superior to all other kinds of writing...because the Western word approximates how it's pronounced (1689)



# Logocentrism

## Definition

- ★ logocentrism: the belief that spoken language is superior to written language (1689)
- ★ logos: the word, speech, presence, truth, reason
- ★ We think that spoken language provides the immediate truth, but it is nonetheless composed of mediating signifiers.
- ★ The history of Western metaphysics is not actual being and truth but rather an illusion or representation of presence. (1689)



# Metaphysics

## Definition

- ★ metaphysics: the branch of philosophy that treats of first principles, includes ontology and cosmology, and is intimately connected with epistemology
- ★ Derrida is deconstructing being and knowledge
- ★ by showing how grammar and writing substitutes presence for absence in a neverending chain of signification (the presence of being is a representational illusion; all we know is the signifier (or rather the chain of) not the signified concept-thing

# Transcendental Signified

- ★transcendental signified: for Derrida, absolute meaning must be an illusion because writing means différance and supplementarity
- ★language escapes and destroys presence, i.e., the metaphysical stability of meaning; language is the absence of presence
- ★I speak and write, therefore I am not

# Différance

## Definition

- ★ **différance**: to differ, but also to defer
- ★ Derrida's coinage includes both the Saussure/structuralist view of signification (language as an arbitrary, differential system; the sign as the unification of signifier and signified)
- ★ And also the poststructuralist view that meaning is always deferred (the signified is always already absent because only signifiers are present)



# The Exorbitant

## Definition and Passage

- ★ the exorbitant (1691): exceeding the bounds of custom, propriety, or reason, especially in amount or extent; highly excessive
- ★ Derrida plays with the root of the word, “orb,” to suggest that meaning exceeds the “orb” or center of any signifier, any work, any text
- ★ “To exceed the metaphysical orb is an attempt to get out of the orbit (orbita), to think the entirety of the classical conceptual oppositions... being produced as a truth at the moment when the value of truth is shattered” (1695)

# Supplément

## Definition and Passage

- ★ **supplément (1691):** a substitute, but also an addition and a supplanting
- ★ **supplementarity:** chain of signifiers substituting for other signifiers, but never arriving at meaning, just adding to process of signification
- ★ **“The play of substitution fills and marks a determined lack.” (1691):** There are no signifieds, there is only the play of signifiers, words, representations.



# Supplément

## Another Passage

“...there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references....And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like ‘real mother’ name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.” (1692)



# Supplément

## Another Passage

“...the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already infiltrated presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self. Representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc. The supplement itself is quite exorbitnant, in every sense of the word.” (1696)

# Supplément

Concluded

- ★ “And what we call production is necessarily a text, the system of a writing and of a reading which we know is ordered around its own blind spot.” (1697)
- ★ The center of the literary work is a hole, an abyss.
- ★ Although we cannot know the essential, core meaning of the text, we can interpret the multiplicitous literary productions circling and in play.

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# Psychoanalytic Criticism

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English 3900

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# Psychoanalytic Criticism

Applies Psychoanalytic Theory

★ While the formalist approaches focus on the meaning derived from the literary text itself, while the structuralist approaches systematize and classify literature, and while the poststructuralist approaches focus on the play of literary meaning, the psychoanalytic approach applies psychoanalysis and focuses on psychological issues of literature and is derived from psychoanalytic theory.

# Classical Theory

Psychoanalysis, as inaugurated by Sigmund Freud, analyzes the psyche, which, according to the theory, is a site of irrational and unconscious conflict between primal desires and traumatic realities. The following slides represent the core of Freud's theory regarding models of psyche, unconscious and repression, pleasure and reality, sexuality, basic disorders, and symptom and cure.



# Repression and the Unconscious

- ★ Two interrelated concepts underly all of Freud's work
  - ★ Repression: the procedure by which the conflicts and realities which the psyche cannot rationally deal with are put out of one's conscious, waking mind
  - ★ Unconscious: the part of the psyche into which conflicts and traumas are repressed

# Two Models of Psyche

## I. Id/Ego/Superego

- ★ Id (it): instinct or drive, the bodily and biological basis of all psychic processes
  - ★ Most id drives like sex are repressed; however, the id does not equal the unconscious.
- ★ Ego (I): the self, which originally develops out of the id, but is tested by reality and influenced by people in reality
  - ★ The ego manages the demands of 1) the libido and id, 2) external reality, and 3) super-ego.
  - ★ Overwhelmed by super-ego or reality, the ego represses prohibited drives or trauma.



# I. Id/Ego/Super-ego

Concluded

## ★ Ego, continued

★ Anxiety and psychic unrest signal the breakdown of the ego's management of its various relations.

## ★ Super-ego (over-I): family and societal influences, voice of authority

★ The super-ego represents the ideal of higher humanity (you ought to be like this--like your father) and the reaction-formation against prohibition (you may not be like this--like your father).

★ Paradoxically, the super-ego's prohibitive idealism can give pleasure; thus the libido can become fused to its own negation, causing neurotic desire, for instance.



# Two Models of Psyche

## 2. Unconscious/Pre-conscious/Conscious

- ★ Unconscious: the site of conflict and trauma, what one has repressed, what one cannot know without analytical help (It's not that one doesn't know she is obsessively washing her hands, but rather that she can't explain why)
- ★ Pre-conscious: what one is not thinking, but could if one chose to (short and long-term memory)
- ★ Conscious: what one is presently aware of

# Pleasure and Reality

- ★ Pleasure principle: originally simply a tension derived from a unsatisfied drive of an erogenous zone, but as the psyche develops memory and fantasy, pleasure is coded into non-genital action of primary process, imagination, dreamwork, and wish-fulfillment
- ★ Reality principle: the secondary process thought of reason and judgment which rivals and supersedes the pleasure principle, thereby installing the unconscious of repressed desires



# Pleasure and Reality

## Continued

- ★ Eros vs Thanatos: undergirding the pleasure and reality principles, which exist in the order of the ego, are primal instincts, which exist in the irrational realm of the id.
- ★ Eros: the life instinct, pleasure derived from creation, love and affection
- ★ Thanatos: the death instinct, pleasure derived from (self-)destruction, hate and aggression



# Pleasure and Reality

Concluded

- ★ Art: a reconciliation between pleasure and reality principles, a sublime working through of Eros and Thanatos.
- ★ Sublimation: the fulfillment of basic bodily drives via transformation into something “better,” civilized and artistic

# Sexuality

- ★ Freud theorizes that humans pass through four stages of sexuality as they grow from infants to sexually active adults.
- ★ These stages seek to 1) localize desire from polymorphous perversity to genital pleasure and 2) transfer auto-erotic pleasure to others in the cause of heterosexual reproduction.
- ★ If a conflict or trauma in one of these stages is not resolved, then neurosis, psychosis, or perversity could result.



# Sexuality

## Continued

- ★ 1) oral, in which the mouth is the site of satisfaction,
- ★ 2) sadistic-anal, in which biting and excretion afford pleasure,
- ★ 3) phallic, in which the child undergoes the Oedipal complex of desire for the mother, rivalry with the father, and appropriate super-ego guilt taught through castration anxiety which causes the child to desire others outside the family; and the period of sexual latency which follows
  - ★ (Note: just because you don't remember your Oedipal complex doesn't mean it didn't happen. You were a toddler, and guilt veils or represses memory.)
- ★ 4) genital, green light for heterosexual reproduction



# Three Basic Disorders

- ★ **Neurosis:** overwhelmed by reality and super-ego, the ego flees reality by suppressing id, desire, conflict, or trauma it cannot manage
- ★ **Psychosis:** with no support from the super-ego, the ego forecloses upon and remodels reality according to unchecked id, desire, conflict, or trauma
- ★ **Perversion:** due to a founding trauma which it disavows the reality of, the ego gives up real sexual pleasure for a symbolic substitute

# Symptom and Cure

- ★ Everyone represses, but those for whom the unconscious causes debilitating suffering seek treatment with a psychoanalyst.
- ★ Symptom: manifest expression of unconscious conflict or trauma, a return of the repressed in somatic and agential form
- ★ Talking cure: the purpose of psychoanalysis is to reveal to the conscious mind, through analytical discourse, the unconscious underlying symptoms
- ★ Active Reversal: once an analysand realizes her unconscious conflicts, she can consciously seek to reverse them through new ways of being toward self, others, and the world



# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

## Three Orders or Realms

- ★ **Imaginary:** Initiated by the Mirror Stage in which the infant, feeling fragmented and inchoate, derives a sense of self and wholeness by looking at an image such as her primary caregiver or her reflection in a mirror, the Imaginary Order constitutes the pre-verbal realm of images in which the child feels complete and unified with the Desire of the Mother.



# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Continued

★ Symbolic Order: Inaugurated by the Name-of-the-Father, i.e., the father's prohibition in language ("No") that breaks the dyadic bond of child and mother, the Symbolic Order is the realm of metonymic desire for the other, for the subject is always searching for the little lost object of desire, *objet petit a*, but only discovers a chain of signifying representations of it in the Big Other, the social rituals, cultural rules, and language system that...

# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

## Symbolic Order, continued

★...can only offer symbolic substitutes for the (primal maternal) presence which it lacks because it lost it via its entrance into language. The Symbolic Order splits the subject into conscious language and unconscious trauma over the castrated loss and subsequent desire for fullness.

# Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Concluded

- ★ Real: Alternatively, that realm which exists beyond or outside both Imaginary being and Symbolic meaning; or that moment of subjective destitution in which one sees through the chain of signifiers of the Symbolic Order and the ideology of the Big Other and is traumatized by the hollow kernel of nothingness, deprived of Symbolic meaning and bereft of Imaginary being.



# Practice

- ★ Whereas Formalism (Liberal Humanism, New Criticism and Russian Formalism) closely reads and resolves the tensions inherent in the text itself...
- ★ Whereas Structuralism (Narratology, Genre Criticism, Semiotics, Semiotics, Interpretive Conventions) finds the text's underlying narrative grammars, genre conventions, sign systems, or reading strategies...

# Practice

Continued

★ Whereas Poststructuralism (and Deconstruction and Postmodernism) exposes the shift and playfulness that renders the text's meaning undecidable...

# Practice

Concluded

- ★ Psychoanalytic literary criticism, using the principles of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, looks at the unconscious psyche as well as the anxieties and desires of a literary text's
  - ★ Narrators or Characters
  - ★ Author or Culture
  - ★ Form or Genre
  - ★ Reader or Society



# Theorists

- ★ Sigmund Freud
- ★ Harold Bloom
- ★ Jacques Lacan
- ★ Julia Kristeva
- ★ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari
- ★ Laura Mulvey
- ★ Slavoj Žižek

# Sigmund Freud

- ★ Argues that dreams are a substitutive thought-process which rework memories and experiences from either 1) the id as disguised expressions of repressed wish-fulfillment or 2) the ego as problem-solving expressions of deep-rooted or everyday life conflicts and traumas.
- ★ Dreams may be interpreted by breaking down the manifest content, which operates according to rules of condensation and displacement as well as conditions of representability and intelligibility, in order to glean the latent content of what the dream really means.

# Sigmund Freud

Continued

## ★ Dreams, continued

- ★ The goal of dream interpretation is to work through rational, conscious secondary process thought to know the irrational, unconscious primary process thought that undergirds it.
- ★ Argues that the uncanny constitutes a familiar yet unconscious knowledge (for instance, of death and mortality), which had been concealed and repressed but which is now returning (for instance by looking at dolls; refer also to the uncanny valley in contemporary animation).



# Sigmund Freud

## Concluded

- ★ Argues that fetishism stems from a sexual trauma which is paradoxically recognized but disavowed such that sexual pleasure becomes confused with, if not wholly dependent upon, a symbolic substitute.
- ★ For example, the child recognizes his mother's castration but disavows it. Consequently, his sexuality unconsciously focuses on and develops around a memory just prior to the castration event, for instance, looking down at his mother's shoes before he looked up at her (castrated) genitals.

# Harold Bloom

★ Defines the anxiety of influence as the recognition that one's poetic identity is in peril because his poetry is belated and secondary to his poetic forefathers'. Poetic history is read as a Freudian family romance in which the strong poet not only wrestles with his rival father but also unconsciously mis-interprets and re-vises his father's poetry in order to generate what he thinks is his own utterly original creation.



# Jacques Lacan

★ Argues that the ego is created in the mirror stage when the infant, who is uncoordinated and inchoate, looks at a caregiver or mirror and internalizes that coherent image as the support structure of his identity, thus inaugurating the self as a fictional, alien, and othered ideal construct designed to contain formlessness and the self's primary desire to live up to the demands of the (Other) man in the mirror.



# Jacques Lacan

Continued

- ★ Argues that the subject is a slave of language. After the mirror stage which forms an imaginary, dyadic relationship between mother and child, the child is forced into the symbolic order of the father's and society's language, which represses his original ontological relationship with the world of his mother into the unconscious.
- ★ Consequently, the subject desires to reconstitute his primal way of being, but cannot because language can only represent, it cannot realize. Desire becomes an neverending chain of metonymy.

# Jacques Lacan

Concluded

- ★ Argues that the phallus is not the real penis, but rather a signifying symbol of power, wholeness, and presence which everyone desires to possess because everyone feels castrated after their entry into the patriarchal symbolic, which severs their imaginary maternal relationship.
- ★ Although everyone wants to appear to have and to be the phallus because of the power it entails, no one really has it because it is just a signifier which slips through our grasp.



# Julia Kristeva

★ Argues that poetry constitutes a revolutionary breakthrough of the chora, the maternal non-expressive totality of drives which precedes figuration and underlies signification, into the symbolic, the patriarchal realm of relational and representational, thetic and ideational language. The resulting semiotic engenders figuration marked by the unconscious.



# Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

★ Argue for a minor literature that deterritorializes the major literature's boundaries of meaning and then enriches it from within.

# Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

Continued

- ★ Argue that books should be read as plateaus of unrestrained and (contra Freud's Oedipal complex) unbounded, deterritorialized and destratified desire that neither rests nor climaxes, but simply becomes and flows.
- ★ Meaning is rhizomatic; it breaks free of the bounded root system and flies into an a-centered, non-hierarchical, non-signifying, root network that shatters linear unity and semantic meaning.

# Laura Mulvey

★ Argues that narrative film gives pleasure to audiences, male and female alike, by influencing them to narcissistically identify with male heroes and voyeuristically turn women characters into fetishistic objects of the male desirous gaze.



# Slavoj Žižek

★ Argues that courtly love is a masochistic, masked performance scripted and authorized by the man who plays the slave to the master Lady, who is not only an ideal Other but an inaccessible thing that functions as a “black hole” around which the subject’s desire is structured,” thereby demonstrating how desire constitutes an infinite postponement and impossible detour.

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# Marxist Criticism

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16 March 2017

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# Marxism

## Theory

Marxism, named after economic, political, and cultural philosopher Karl Marx, is a school of thought that examines how politically endorsed economic systems structure societies (organized communities) and cultures (the beliefs and values of communities).

# Society

According to Marxism, societies are composed of two elements.

- ★ **Base: economics**

- ★ the material modes of production

- ★ **Superstructure: sociopolitical ideology**

- ★ the culture such as education, philosophy, religion, government, arts, and science

# Class

Within a society, people are divided into classes.

- ★ (Socio-)economic class: a group of people categorized by a particular relationship to economic and social power, i.e., its relationship to the base and superstructure
- ★ The two basic classes in classical Marxism:
  - ★ bourgeoisie: in a capitalist system, those who own and control the base and implement the superstructure
  - ★ proletariat: in a capitalist system, those who manage (but neither own nor control) the base and are programmed by the superstructure



# Class

## Continued

- ★ In contemporary America, the classes are more complicated than the bourgeoisie and the proletariat:
  - ★ Lower class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, upper class
  - ★ Working class, middle class, affluent professional, executive elite (from Jean Anyon)
  - ★ Working poor
  - ★ Intellectual class (from Antonio Gramsci)
  - ★ The 99% and the 1%

# Types of Societies

Marxism predominantly looks at three kinds of societies.

- ★ **Capitalism:** a free-market economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods
- ★ **Capital:** Money used to make more money, either by purchasing goods or labor to make goods and selling for profit
- ★ **The bourgeoisie own the capital while the proletariat hire their bodies for wages (wage labor).**

# Types of Societies

Continued

- ★ **Socialism:** the stage after the proletarian revolution when a society is changing from capitalism to communism
- ★ The people control the means of production and operate it based on fairness rather than free-market.



# Types of Societies

## Concluded

- ★ **Communism:** the political theory in which all property and wealth is owned in a classless society by all the members of a community
- ★ Although the former Soviet Union and the present China and Cuba, for example, call themselves communist, they are oligarchies (government by a small group of people) and dictatorships (government by one ruler).
- ★ Although communism is the goal of Marxism, many (Marxists included) consider it a utopian dream, and instead focus on achieving at least class consciousness in the culture and socialism in the government at best.

# The Dialectical Materialist View of History

- ★ Materialism: focus on the physical world (for example, wealth and possessions), based on the belief that the mind follows the body
- ★ History: study of the past and how the past progresses into the present and future



# Dialectical Materialism

Concluded

- ★ Dialectic: the progressive process by which two opposing thoughts, thesis and antithesis, become combined in a unified whole or synthesis
- ★ Dialectical materialism: the historical process by which opposing forces such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat or the material reality and a culture's consciousness of its material reality perpetually struggle to bring about a justly organized and self-reflective society
- ★ Praxis: method by which theory is put into practice



# Commodity Value

## ★ Three Types of Value

- ★ Use Value: the utilitarian value of a commodity based on its use (the value of an iPad to an individual user)
- ★ Exchange Value: the market value of a commodity based on its raw material, labor, and production costs (the value of an iPad based on design, material, labor, production, and shipping costs)
- ★ Sign Exchange Value: the value of a commodity based on its status (the value of an iPad based on the coolness, hipness, and hype of Apple iDevices)

# Commodification

- ★ **Commodification:** treating objects and people for their economic or social status rather than for their aesthetic or human value
- ★ **Commodification of Desire:** humanity's wants and needs become entangled in conspicuous consumption and commodity fetish such that the ruling class does not need to physically oppress the classes that are under them if those classes purposefully sacrifice themselves as wage-slaves in order to acquire the stuff that the ideology programmed them to fixate on
- ★ **Reification:** the alienating way that commodification reduces social relations, ideas, and people to things



# Ideology and Consciousness

- ★ Ideology: in classical Marxism, a belief system brought about by cultural conditioning that portrays arbitrary structures of existence as natural and innate ways of being, such as capitalist ideology or Marxist ideology
- ★ However, in contemporary Marxism, the term has come to mean (because of Althusser) in many instances how the culture blinds an oppressed class to its material conditions of existence by erecting an illusion; common ideologies that operate in the service of American capitalism and those who hold power under capitalism are the American dream, patriotism, religion, individualism, and consumerism.



# Ideology and Consciousness

Continued

- ★ Interpellation: from Althusser, the ideological and economic system reproduces itself by implicitly hailing us as subjects who passively and unconsciously support the dominant social assumptions
- ★ Alienation: originally from Marx, meaning the estrangement from one's own labor
  - ★ However, the term now also suggests the estrangement from self and society, and the feeling of not belonging to and subsequent withdrawal from the world.

# Ideology and Consciousness

Concluded

- ★ Hegemony (from Antonio Gramsci): domination of one social class over others through the use of cultural power and influence that creates the consent of the masses
- ★ Organic Intellectuals: leaders who rise from within the masses to use civil society to speak for the people
- ★ Class consciousness: awareness of the (alienating and commodified) socioeconomic conditions of one's class
- ★ False consciousness: the lack of awareness or ideological illusions of one's conditions of existence



# Marxist Literary Criticism

Whereas New Critics closely read the text to find its universal theme...While structuralist critics examine the structure of literary genres, the grammar of narrative patterns, or the literary conventions of reading...Whereas poststructuralist critics revel in the shifting, paradoxical, and playful meanings of the work...While psychoanalytic critics interpret the unconscious conflicts of the psyche, Marxist literary critics approach a text as detached scholars examining economic and class issues both inside and outside of the text, cultural advocates revealing the text's ideological or revolutionary forces, and/or both.



# Marxist Literary Criticism

## Inside the Text

- ★ The objective Marxist critic looks “inside” the content of the text (for example, at the character and plot) for issues, ideas, and themes relating to the materialist history of capitalist socioeconomic class struggle.
- ★ The supportive Marxist critic interprets how the work of literature *either* exposes and challenges *or* manifests and reifies class ideology.

# Marxist Literary Criticism

## Outside the Text

- ★ The objective Marxist critic looks “outside” the text at the author’s class, the literary genre and period, the readers’ social assumptions, and the literary form’s politics to determine how the class of text derives from and/or reifies its society’s dominant mode of production.
- ★ The supportive Marxist critic evaluates whether the form employs realism or experimentation, and then she evaluates whether the realist or experimental form serves ideological or revolutionary ends.

# Marxism

## Theorists

- ★ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
- ★ Leon Trotsky
- ★ György (Georg) Lukács [lou-KOTCH]
- ★ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno
- ★ Walter Benjamin [ben-yeh-MEEN]
- ★ Louis Althusser [ALT-whos-sair]
- ★ Fredric Jameson



# Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

- ★ Describe the transformation from feudalism to capitalism via the rise of the bourgeoisie who “agglomerated production, and ...concentrated property in a few hands” and then theorize the rise of the proletariat, “the modern working class” *against* the bourgeoisie, and concludes with an ideal list of social goals for advanced, communist countries, including abolition of private property and State-owned means of production, that will cause class distinctions to disappear.

# Leon Trotsky

- ★ Argues for a criticism, which is scientific like Formalism and socially progressive like Futurism, but which does not get lost in the abstract world of autonomous and pure bourgeois art that is disconnected from the real social conditions of the world.
- ★ Argues that artistic progress should not be governmentally controlled, like Socialist Realism, but rather will occur as part of dialectical history because human imagination is tied to economic reality.



# György (Georg) Lukács

- ★ Argues that there are three kinds of literature: 1) anti-realist or pseudo-realist, 2) avant-garde or modern(ist), and 3) realism.
- ★ While 1) and 2) eschew reality, only “creative” realism portrays a “totality” of complex yet unified reality that supports the dialectic materialist critique of alienation as the fact of life under capitalism by cutting beneath the “appearance” of life and arriving at its true “essence.”



# Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno

- ★ Argue how the business of mass culture and art as entertainment suppresses individualized consciousness, eradicates consumer imagination, and programs audiences to become types who experience pleasure only in its prepackaged, canned form--on film.
- ★ Such taming of the masses makes them socio-, politico-, and economically complacent.

# Walter Benjamin

★ Argues that the change in the capitalist technological base transforms the superstructure, in particular that the introduction of mechanical reproduction and the move from painting to photography and film causes the exclusive cult of ritualized yet apperceptive and critical value of artistic aura to be supplanted by exhibition value designed for distracting and entertaining mass appeal.

# Louis Althusser

- ★ Argues that art should not only observe an internal distance from but also reveal ideology, by which he means the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.
- ★ Argues that Ideological State Apparatuses interpellate individuals as subjects so that external, repressive power is unnecessary because subjects submit freely to the State and accept their subjugation.



# Fredric Jameson

★ Argues that postmodernism constitutes a reaction to high modernism that blurs high and mass culture, supplants parody with pastiche, and loses a sense of bourgeois subjectivity, accessible history, and material space.

# MLA Citation

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