

# What Is Critical Theory?

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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

- ★ Formalism (New Criticism and Russian Formalism): close reading of the text itself, paying particular heed to its unifying tensions and analysis of internal form
- ★ Structuralism (Semiotics, Myth Criticism, and Narratology): the analysis of signs and codes within linguistic systems
- ★ Post-Structuralism (Deconstruction and Postmodernism): the analysis of a text's plays, slippages, and aporias of meaning

# What We Will Cover

## Concluded

- ★ Psychoanalysis: the analysis of the conflicted psyche of the author, text, and culture
- ★ Historical Criticism (Marxism, New Historicism, and Cultural Materialism): socio-economic historical and cultural analyses

# What We May Cover

- ★ Phenomenology (Reader-Response Criticism, Reception Studies, and Ethics): examines the relationship of the text to the reader and the world, for example, as meaningful action
- ★ Cognitive Criticism: analyses of texts from the perspective of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology

# What We May Cover

Continued

- ★ Feminism and Gender Studies: analyses based on 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.
- ★ Ethnic Studies: analyses of ethnic groups' (such as African-American or Hispanic-American literary history and aesthetic heritage as well as the social construction of racial identity)

# What We May Cover

Concluded

- ★ Postcolonial Criticism: analyses of colonial ideology (oppression and othering) and postcolonial resistance.
- ★ Ecocriticism: analyses of texts from the ecological, environmental, and natural perspective, focusing the relationship between animals, spaces, and humans

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# **Formalism: Liberal Humanism, Russian Criticism, New Criticism**

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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,
- ★ Trancending 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.

# 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.

# 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

# 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* 133)

# John Crowe Ransom

New Critic

- ★ In “Criticism, Inc.” advocates for a scientific and systematic “business of criticism.”

# Cleanth Brooks

New Critic

- ★ In “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” argues that paraphrasing the poem violates the meaning of the poem.
- ★ Advocates for analyzing the irony (the general incongruity of forces within the poem), the paradox (the poem makes contradictory statements), and the ambiguity (the multiplicity of connoteive meaning within the poem). . . .

# Cleanth Brooks

## Concluded

- ★ . . . After determining the irony, paradox, and ambiguity, argues that the formalist critic should look at how the poem resolves ironies, paradoxes, and ambiguities and achieves organic unity (the poem is an harmonic whole).
- ★ Believes that the structure of the poem is part of the meaning of the poem: “Form is content.”

# 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

# T. S. Eliot

Liberal Humanist

- ★ 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

# F. R. Leavis

Liberal Humanist

- ★ *Although some consider Leavis a New Critic because of his practical criticism, his version of formalism includes life and society in a way that exceeds New Criticism's focus on the text itself.*
- ★ *Art and Life: Great writers not only change the possibilities of the forms of art, thereby establishing the literary tradition, but also the awareness of the possibilities of life. They “satisfy] the rival claims of life and art” both by innovating in form and method and by being alive to the spirit of the age.*

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# **Structuralism: Semiotics, Genre Criticism, Narratology, Interpretive Conventions**

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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 sign systems, 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, anagoris, 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 202)

# Ferdinand de Saussure

## Structural Linguistics

★ 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 differential, relational value. Meaning exists in difference. Structural linguistics influences the conception of identity as differential and relational rather than positive and essential.

# Ferdinand de Saussure

Concluded

- ★ While diachrony involves the linguistic system changing slowly over time, synchrony equates with taking a snapshot of the entire system at one point in time.
- ★ While a syntagmic relation is composed of linearly related units inside a particular discourse system, an associative relation involves analogously related units across multiple discourse systems.

# Roman Jakobson

## Structural Linguistics

★ 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

## Genre Criticism

★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 categories 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

## Narratology

★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

## Semiotics

- ★ 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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