

# Literary Criticism and Theory: A Basic Look

Ms. Weiston

English IV

# What is Analysis?

## Analysis is:

- Separation of a whole into its component parts.
- The identification or separation of ingredients of a substance.
- An examination of a complex, its elements, and their relations.
- Write a definition of analysis in your own

words: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# What is Literary Analysis?

- Literary theory/criticism assumes that there is no such thing as an innocent reading of a text.
- Discussion around a text includes:
  - Questioning
  - Reasoning
  - Application

# What is Literary Criticism?

Literary criticism is defined as an “activity that attempts to describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret and evaluate a work of art.”

Charles Bressler

# Basic Questions for Criticism

- When analyzing a text, literary critics ask the following questions about the philosophical, functional, and descriptive nature of the text.
  - Does a text have only one correct meaning?
  - Is a text always didactic; that is, must a reader learn something from every text?
  - Does a text affect each reader in the same way?
  - How is a text influenced by the culture of its author and the culture in which it is written?
  - Can a text become a catalyst for change in a given culture?

# What is Literary Theory?

- Literary theory is defined as the assumptions that undergird one's understanding and interpretation of language, the construction of meaning, art, culture, aesthetics, and ideological positions.

# Basic Questions for Theory

- Reading that interacts with the text, asking many specific, text related questions and, often times, rather personal ones as well.
  - What kind of person is..?
  - Is he/she like someone I know?
  - What is the function or role of..?
  - What is the significance of the \_\_\_\_\_ scene?

# New Criticism

- A loosely structured form of criticism that has dominated American literary criticism from the early 1930's to the 1960's.
- Based on the idea that a work of art or a text is a concrete object that can, like any other concrete object, be analyzed to discover its meaning independent of its authors intention or the emotional state and/or values of either its author or its reader. A texts meaning resides within its own structure.



# Questions for Analysis using New Criticism

- If the text has a title, what is the relationship of the title to the rest of the work?
- What words, if any, need to be defined?
- What relationships or patterns do you see among any words in the text?
- What symbols, images, and figures of speech are used? What is the relationship between any symbol or image? Between an image and another image? Between a figure of speech and an image? A symbol?
- What is the tone of the work?
- From what point of view is the context of the text being told?
- How do all the elements of the text support and develop the text's chief paradox?

# Analysis using New Criticism

- Arrange yourselves into 8 groups of 4.
- Turn to pg. 583 in your textbooks.
- Read, within your groups, Keats' *To Autumn*.
- Discuss the poem using the New Criticism questions provided to your group and be prepared to share with the whole group in ten minutes.

# Reader Response Criticism

- A literary criticism rising to prominence in the 1970's. Reader response asserts that the reader is active, not passive, during the reading process. The text acts as a stimulus for eliciting various past experiences, thoughts and ideas of the reader, those found in both real life and in past experiences. For reader-response critics, the reader + the text = meaning.
- The reader- including his or her view of the world, background, purpose for reading, knowledge of the world, knowledge of words, and other such factors; influence the way in which the work is read and interpreted.

# Questions for Analysis using Reader Response Criticism

- Who is the actual reader?
- Who is the implied reader?
- Who is the ideal reader?
- Who is the narratee?
- What are some gaps you see in the text?
- What part, if any, does the author play in a work's interpretation?

# Analysis using Reader-Response Criticism

- Arrange yourselves into 8 groups of 4.
- Turn to pg. 952 in your textbooks.
- Read, within your groups, Eliots' *The Hollow Men*.
- Discuss the poem using the Reader-Response questions provided to your group and be prepared to share with the whole group in ten minutes.

# Marxism

- An approach to literary analysis founded on principles articulated by Engels and Marx. Marxism is not primarily a literary theory that can be used to interpret a text, for it is first a set of social, economic, and political ideas that its followers believe will enable them to interpret and change their world. Ultimate reality, they declare, is material not spiritual. What we know beyond any doubt is that human beings exist and live in social groups. In order to understand ourselves and our world, we must first acknowledge the interrelatedness of all our actions within society. Once understood properly, we will note that it is our cultural and our social circumstances that determine who we are. What we believe, what we value, and how we think are a direct result of our society, and that society, says Marxism, is built upon a series of ongoing conflicts between the “haves” and the “have nots.”

# Questions for Analysis using Marxism

- Does the text raise fundamental criticism about the emptiness of life in bourgeois society?
- How well is the fate of the individual linked organically to the nature of societal forces? What are the work's conflicting forces?
- At what points are actions or solutions to problems forced or unreal?
- Are characters from all social levels equally well sketched?
- What are the values of each class in the work?
- Does the protagonist defend or defect from the dominant values of society? Are those values in ascendancy or decay?

# Analysis using Marxism

- Arrange yourselves into 8 groups of 4.
- Turn to pg. in your textbooks.
- Read, within your groups,
- Discuss the poem using the Marxism questions provided to your group and be prepared to share with the whole group in ten minutes.



# New Historicism

- The American branch of cultural poetics which appeared in the late 1970's and early 1980's and is one of the most recent approaches to analysis.
- Takes the stance that history is subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past. Attempts to highlight the interrelatedness of all human activities, admits its own prejudices, and tries to give a more complete understanding of the text.

# Questions for Analyzing using New Historicism

- What kinds of behavior, what models of practice, does this work seem to reinforce?
- Why might readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling?
- Are there differences between my values and the values implicit in the work I am reading?
- Upon what social understanding does the work depend?
- Whose freedom of thought or movement might be constrained implicitly or explicitly by this work?
- What are the larger social structures with which these particular acts of praise or blame might be connected?

# Analysis using New Historicism

- Arrange yourselves into 8 groups of 4.
- Turn to pg. in your textbooks.
- Read, within your groups,
- Discuss the poem using the Marxism questions provided to your group and be prepared to share with the whole group in ten minutes.

# Bibliography

Notes taken and summarized from

Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003.