What, Why, and How?

Main Literary Forms:
- Fiction
- Drama
- Poetry

Literary Theories
WHAT ARE THE MAIN LITERARY FORMS?

The main literary forms are **Fiction, Drama & Poetry**.

Although each of the three major literary genres, **fiction**, **drama**, and **poetry** are different, they have many elements in common. For example, in all three genres, authors make purposeful use of **diction** (word choice), employ **imagery** (significant detail) and each piece of literature has its own unique **tone** (emotional quality). An important element that you will find in all three genres is **theme**, the larger meaning(s) the reader derives from the poem, story, novel or play.

Each of the literary genres is distinguished by its form: Fiction is written in **sentences and paragraphs**. Poetry is written in **lines and stanzas**. Drama is written in **dialogue**.

WHY IS KNOWING THEM IMPORTANT?

As you read different forms of literature you will need to know specialized vocabulary to be able to best understand, interpret, and write about what you are reading. Also, how you approach a literary text and what you focus on will depend on its literary form. For instance, **fiction and drama** are typically anchored by a reader’s engagement with **characters** while many **poems** do not contain a character or tell a story. Therefore, **plot** is often not a factor in a **poem**. A **poem** can be an **impression or reflection** about a person, a place, an experience or an idea.

HOW DO I APPROACH EACH FORM?

**FICTION**

KNOW THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FICTION:

**Short Stories** are usually defined as being between 2000-6000 words long. Most short stories have at least one **“rounded”** (developed and complex) character and any number of **“flat”** (less-developed, simpler) characters. Short stories tend to focus on one major source of conflict and often take place within one basic time period.

**Novellas** generally run between 50-150 pages, halfway between a story and a novel.

**Novels** don’t have a prescribed length. Because they are a longer form of fiction, an author has more freedom to work with plot and characters, as well as develop sub-plots and move freely through time. Characters can change and develop over the course of time and the theme(s) can be broader and more intricate than in shorter forms of fiction.
KNOW THE DIFFERENT TYPES AND STRUCTURE OF DRAMA:

Drama Types:

**Tragedy** – generally serious in tone, focusing on a protagonist who experiences an eventual downfall

**Comedy** – light in tone, employs humor and ends happily

**Satire** – exaggerated and comic in tone for the purpose of criticism or ridicule

**Experimental** – can be light or serious in tone. It creates its own style through experimentation with language, characters, plot, etc.

**Musical** – can be light or serious. The majority of the dialogue is sung rather than spoken.

Drama Structure:

Plays are organized into **dialogue, scenes and acts**. A play can be made up one act or multiple acts. Each act is divided into scenes, in which a character, or characters, come on or off stage and speak their lines. A play can have only one character or many characters. The main character is the **protagonist** and a character who opposes him/her is the **antagonist**.

The plots of plays typically follow this pattern:

- **Rising Action** – complications the protagonist must face, composed of any number of conflicts and crises
- **Climax** – the peak of the rising action and the turning point for the protagonist
- **Falling Action** – the movement toward a resolution

COMMONALITIES OF FICTION AND DRAMA TERMS:

Both fiction and drama are typically anchored by plot and character. They also contain literary themes as well as having other elements in common, so we will look at literary terms that can be applied to both of these literary forms.
FICTION AND DRAMA TERMS:

PLOT: Plot is the unfolding of a dramatic situation; it is what happens in the narrative. Be aware that writers of fiction arrange fictional events into patterns. They select these events carefully, they establish causal relationships among events, and they enliven these events with conflict. Therefore, more accurately defined, plot is a pattern of carefully selected, casually related events that contain conflict.

There are two general categories of conflict: **internal conflict**, takes place within the minds of the characters and **external conflict**, takes place between individuals or between individuals and the world external to the individuals (the forces of nature, human created objects, and environments).

The forces in a conflict are usually embodied by characters, the most relevant being the **protagonist**, the main character, and the **antagonist**, the opponent of the protagonist (the antagonist is usually a person but can also be a nonhuman force or even an aspect of the protagonist—his or her tendency toward evil and self-destruction for example).

QUESTIONS ABOUT PLOT: What conflicts does it dramatize?

- What is the main conflict?
- What are the minor conflicts?
- How are all the conflicts related?
- What causes the conflicts?
- Which conflicts are external, which are internal?
- What qualities or values does the author associate with each side of the conflict?
- Where does the turning point or climax occur? Why?
- How is the main conflict resolved?
- Which conflicts go unresolved? Why?

CHARACTERS: There are two broad categories of character development: simple and complex. **Simple (or “flat”) characters** have only one or two personality traits and are easily recognizable as stereotypes—the shrewish wife, the lazy husband, the egomaniac, etc. **Complex (or “rounded”) characters** have multiple personality traits and therefore resemble real people. They are much harder to understand and describe than simple characters. No single description or interpretation can fully contain them. For the characters in modern fiction, the hero has often been replaced by the **antihero**, an ordinary, unglamorous person often confused, frustrated and at odds with modern life.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHARACTERS: What is revealed by the characters and how they are portrayed?

- Are they simple, complex, dynamic or static?
- If they are complex, what makes them complex?
- What are the traits of the main characters in the story?
- Do they change? How and why?
- What events or moments of self-realization produce these changes?
- What do they learn?
- Does what they learn help or hinder them?
- What problems do they have?
- How do they attempt to solve them?
- Do they experience epiphanies (life changing moments of insight, discovery or revelation)?
- What emotional reactions do the main characters have and in reaction to what?
- Do they have traits that contradict one another or cause internal conflicts?
- How do they interact with one another?
- How do they relate to one another?
FICTION AND DRAMA TERMS:

**THEME:** The theme is an idea or point that is central to a story, which can often be summed up in a word or a few words (e.g. loneliness, fate, oppression, rebirth, coming of age; humans in conflict with technology; nostalgia; the dangers of unchecked power). A story may have several themes. Themes often explore historically common or cross-culturally recognizable ideas, such as ethical questions and commentary on the human condition, and are usually implied rather than stated explicitly.

**QUESTIONS ABOUT THEME:** To help identify themes ask yourself questions such as these:

- Is the title or are the character names related to the theme?
- Does the main character change in any way? Realize anything important?
- Does the author or do the characters make any important observations about life, human nature or human behavior?
- Are themes revealed through actions, dramatic statements or personalities of characters?
- If characters convey conflicting values, which values does the work seem to be defending?
- Are there repeating patterns or symbols?

- What image of humankind emerges from the work? How is society portrayed?
- Are characters in conflict with their society?
- If the society is flawed, how is it flawed?
- What control over their lives do the characters have?
- What are the moral issues or conflicts in the work?
- What did you feel after you read the story? What part of your life connected with the story and where did that connection happen?
- What ideas are implied by the total impression of the work?

**SYMBOLISM:** In the broadest sense, a symbol is something that represents something else. Words, for example, are symbols. But in literature, a **symbol** is an object that has meaning beyond itself. The object is concrete and the meanings are abstract.

**QUESTIONS ABOUT SYMBOLS:** Not every work uses symbols, and not every character, incident, or object in a work has symbolic value. You should ask fundamental questions in locating and interpreting symbols:

- What symbols does the work seem to have?
- Are you sure you are not finding a “symbol” where none was intended?
- How do you know it is a symbol?
- What does the author do that gives symbolic meaning to this element?

- Is there evidence in the text that can be used to understand and develop this symbol?
- What does the symbol mean?
- What larger meaning can be understood through this symbol?
MORE FICTION AND DRAMA TERMS:

SETTING: The social mores, values, and customs of the world in which the characters live; the physical world; and the time of the action, including historical circumstances.

TONE: The narrator’s predominant attitude toward the subject, whether that subject is a particular setting, an event, a character, or an idea.

POINT OF VIEW: The author’s relationship to his or her fictional world, especially to the minds of the characters. Put another way, point of view is the position from which the story is told. There are four common points of view:

* **Omniscient point of view**—the author tells the story and assumes complete knowledge of the characters’ actions and thoughts.
* **Limited omniscient point of view**—the author still narrates the story but restricts his or her revelation—and therefore our knowledge—to the thoughts of just one character.
* **First person point of view**—one of the characters tells the story, eliminating the author as narrator. The narration is restricted to what one character says he or she observes.
* **Objective point of view**—the author is the narrator but does not enter the minds of any of the characters. The writer sees them (and lets us see them) as we would in real life.

FORESHADOWING: The anticipation of something, which will happen later. It is often done subtlety with symbols or other indirect devices. We have to use inferential thinking to identify foreshadowing in some stories, and often it occurs on an almost emotional level as we’re reading, leading us further into the heart of the story.

EXPOSITION: The opening portion of a story that sets the scene, introduces characters and gives background information we may need to understand the story.

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE: An extended exploration of one character’s thoughts told from the inside but as if spoken out loud for the reader to overhear.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS: A style of presenting thoughts and sense impressions in a lifelike fashion, the way thoughts move freely through the mind, often chaotic or dreamlike.

IRONY: Generally irony makes visible a contrast between appearance and reality. More fully and specifically, it exposes and underscores a contrast between (1) what is and what seems to be, (2) between what is and what ought to be, (3) between what is and what one wishes to be, (4) and between what is and what one expects to be. Incongruity is the method of irony; opposites come suddenly together so that the disparity is obvious.

CLIMAX: The moment of greatest tension when a problem or complication may be resolved or, at least, confronted.

RESOLUTION, CONCLUSION or DENOUEMENT ("untying of the knot"): Brings the problem to some sort of finality, not necessarily a happy ending, but a resolution.
Using the literary vocabulary and questions, let’s analyze a literary text.

Read the memoir, “Learning to Read,” by Jessica Powers which can be located in Chapter 1: Critical Reading in the “Faculty-Written Texts” section. Powers employs many of the elements of fiction in this autobiographical piece. When you have finished reading, answer the questions below.

**Questions about plot:**
1. What is the main conflict in the story?
2. What causes the conflict?
3. Is the conflict external or internal?
4. What is the turning point in the story?
5. How is the main conflict resolved?

**Questions about character:**
1. Is the main character simple or complex? Explain.
2. What are the traits of the main character? Make a list.
3. Does the main character change? Describe.
4. What steps does she go through to change? Make a list.
5. What does she learn? Describe.
6. Does the main character experience an epiphany? Describe.

**Questions about theme:**
1. What does the story show us about human behavior?
2. Are there moral issues raised by the story? Describe.
3. What does the story tell us about why people change?
Types of Poetry

Poetry can be written in two general categories, **formal** or **free verse**. **Formal verse** has set rules and structures that dictate how it must be written. For example, a **sonnet** is written in fourteen lines that follow a set rhyming pattern. **Free verse** follows what poet, Denise Levertov, called “organic form,” meaning that a poem can be any shape or size it needs to be to communicate its message.

Some different types of Formal Verse:

- **Sonnet**: a poem that is metered and rhymed of 14 lines usually in iambic pentameter
- **Villanelle**: a French form of 19 lines in iambic pentameter with only two rhymes
- **Sestina**: an unrhymed poem that places the same six words in varying patterns through six stanzas, ending with a two-line stanza
- **Haiku**: a Japanese form of three lines in which the first and third lines contain 5 syllables and the second line contains 7 syllables

Types of poetry styles:

- **Narrative**: tells a story
- **Imagist**: uses rich sensory imagery
- **Lyrical**: expresses strongly felt emotion and is written in a shorter form
- **Persona**: relies on a character whose voice speaks the poem
- **Confessional**: speaks openly about a poet's personal life
- **Satirical**: uses humor to make a point
- **Sound**: relies on sounds rather than ideas to create meaning
- **Concrete**: takes on the literal shape of its subject
- **Experimental**: creates its own style through experimentation with language, shape, meaning and form
- **Epic**: deals with a mythic, legendary or historic event and often focuses on a hero and is written in a longer form
- **Occasional**: marks a particular occasion, like a birthday, dedication, death or marriage
POETRY TERMS:

Poetry shares many elements with its sister genres, fiction and drama such as characterization, plot, and theme. Most poems, however, do not offer a “story” in the conventional sense. They are usually brief and apparently devoid of “action.” Even so, a plot of sorts may be implied, a place and time may be important, a specific point of view may be operating, and characters may be dramatizing the key issues of the poem.

SPEAKER: In any poem there is always one “character” of the utmost importance which is the speaker, the “I” of the poem. Often the speaker is a fictional personage, not at all equivalent to the poet.

QUESTIONs ABOUT THE SPEAKER:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who is speaking?</th>
<th>What situation is being described?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What characterizes the speaker?</td>
<td>What are the conflicts or tensions in the situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To whom is he or she speaking?</td>
<td>How is setting—social situation, physical place, and time—important to the speaker?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the speaker’s tone?</td>
<td>What ideas is the speaker communicating?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the speaker’s emotional state?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is he or she speaking?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IMAGERY: Descriptive Language: Although the word imagery calls to mind the visual sense, poetic imagery appeals to all the senses. Sensuous imagery is pleasurable for its own sake, but it also provides a concreteness and immediacy. Imagery causes the reader to become personally, experientially involved in the subject matter of the poem.

IMAGERY: Figurative Language: The conscious departure from normal or conventional ways of saying things. This could mean merely a rearrangement of the normal word order of a sentence. A much more common category of figurative language is tropes. Tropes (literally “turns”) extend the meaning of words beyond their literal meaning, and the most common form of trope is metaphor. A metaphor is a type of analogy which is a similarity between things that are basically different.

QUESTIONs ABOUT IMAGERY:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What senses does the poet appeal to?</th>
<th>How are the descriptive images used to create atmosphere and mood?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What analogies are implied or stated directly?</td>
<td>What is the relationship between the descriptive images and the speaker’s state of mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does the poet use these particular images and analogies?</td>
<td>What dominant impression do the images make?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is metaphor used in the poem? To reveal what?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MORE POETRY TERMS:

**ALLITERATION:** the repetition of the same sound at the beginning of words, as in "he clasps the crag with crooked hands."

**ALLUSION:** a reference in a poem to a historical or literary character, event, idea or place outside the piece of writing.

**AMBIGUITY:** a quality of certain words and phrases whereby meaning is unclear -- often used intentionally to create multiple layers of meaning.

**BALLAD:** a songlike, narrative poem with a recurring refrain and four-line stanzas.

**CONCEIT:** an extended, elaborate and often farfetched comparison that continues throughout a poem.

**CONCRETE POETRY:** poems that use the physical arrangement of words on the page to mirror meaning such as a poem about a car that is car-shaped.

**CONSONANCE:** repetition of similar sounds in the final consonants of words as in torn/burn, add/read, heaven/given.

**COUPLET:** two rhymed lines of verse -- when separated or self-contained, called a closed couplet.

**DICTION:** Refers to the poet’s choice of words. Poets are sensitive to the subtle shades of meaning of words, to the possible double meanings of words, and to the **denotative** (the object or idea that the word represents) and **connotative** (the subjective, emotional association of a word) meanings of words.

**ELEGY:** a poem of mourning and lamentation often associated with death.

**END RHYME:** a rhyme in which the last words of two or more lines of poetry rhyme with each other.

**END-STOPPED LINE:** a line of poetry that ends with a period, colon or semi-colon.

**ENJAMBMENT:** the continuation of a line in a poem so that it spills over into the next line.

**EPIC POEM:** a lengthy narrative poem, ordinarily concerning a serious subject containing details of heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation.

**EXTENDED METAPHOR:** a metaphor that continues throughout the piece of writing.

**FREE VERSE:** poetry with no regular pattern of meter or rhyme. It avoids strict adherence to metrical patterns and to fixed line lengths. But it is not entirely “free,” for it uses other ways of creating rhythm and sound patterns.

**HYPERBOLE:** extreme exaggeration such as "he’s as strong as an ox".

**LINE BREAKS:** where a poet chooses to end one line and start another.
**METAPHOR:** comparison between two essentially unlike things without the use of "like" or "as".

**METER:** the underlying regular beat in a poem; ex: pentameter has five stressed syllables to a line.

**PERSONIFICATION:** figurative language that endows something nonhuman with human qualities as in "the trees whispered in the wind."

**PROSE POEM:** a poem written with straight left-hand margins in paragraph form like prose.

**REFRAIN:** the same line or group of lines repeated at intervals in a poem.

**RHYTHM:** All human speech has rhythm, but poetry regularizes that rhythm into recognizable patterns. These patterns are called *meters*. Metrical patterns vary depending on the sequence in which one arranges the accented and unaccented syllables of an utterance. The unit that determines that arrangement is the foot. A *foot* is one unit of rhythm in verse.

**SIMILE:** a comparison between two unlike things using "as" or "like" or "as if".

**SOUND:** Poets delight in the sound of language and consciously present sounds to be enjoyed for themselves. They also use them to emphasize meaning, action, and emotion, and especially to call the reader’s attention to the relationship of certain words. Rhyme, for example, has the effect of linking words together. Among the most common sound devices are the following:

* **Onomatopoeia**—the use of words that sound like what they mean ("buzz," "boom," "hiss")
* **Alliteration**—the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words or at the beginning of accented syllables ("the woeful woman went wading Wednesday")
* **Rhyme**—the repetition of accented vowels and the sounds that follow.

**STANZA:** a grouping of lines, somewhat like a paragraph in prose.

**STRESS:** an accent that makes one syllable stand out from the others in a word or phrase --used in metrical poetry.

**STRUCTURE:** Poets give structure to their poems in two overlapping ways: by organizing ideas according to a logical plan and by creating a pattern of sounds. Perhaps the most common sound device by which poets create structure is end rhyme, and any pattern of end rhyme is called a *rhyme scheme*. Rhyme scheme helps to establish another structural device, the *stanza*, which is physically separated from other stanzas by extra spaces and usually represents one idea.
Poetry Chart: Poetry is challenging and requires the reader to actively engage to illicit meaning. Here is a chart to help you apply poetry concepts to analyze a poem:

| Paraphrase: Put the poem into your own words to better understand it. Read the poem several times out loud before you try to summarize it. |
| Title: What is revealed in the title? How does it connect to the content of the poem? Is the title referenced again in the poem? Does it connect to the poem’s theme? |

| Speaker: Who is the speaker? Is the speaker (or narrator) the same person as the author? How do we know? What are the speaker’s concerns? Mood? What are the main traits of the speaker? Is the speaker interacting with anyone else in the poem? |
| Setting: Is the setting described or made clear? Where does it take place? When? What time of day? What season? Is the historical, political or social context important? |
| Turning Points: Are there turning points or moments of change? How does it begin? Is there a moment when the story, ideas, thoughts or descriptions change in order to get to the point at the end of the poem? |

| Tension: What is the conflict or point of tension in the poem? Is there an external or internal conflict? Physical, spiritual, moral, philosophical, or social? How is the tension in that conflict developed with poetic elements? Is it resolved? If so, how? |
| Diction: What can you learn by examining the particular word choices in the poem? Are certain sounds, words or phrases repeated? How is language used to evoke the senses? Set the tone? Is metaphor used? What imagery is present? |
| Theme: Is there a mood or overarching aspect of the poem? Are there repeated patterns in the poem that work together? How do the parts of the poem contribute to a connecting theme? |
Use the Poetry Chart and the additional study questions to analyze the following poem:

Katharine Harer’s poems have been published in literary journals, anthologies, and newspapers and on poetry websites, and she has written five books of poetry. Katharine has worked as a poet-teacher and as Statewide Coordinator of the California Poets in The Schools program, and she served as the Director of Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center in San Francisco. For almost a decade, she co-coordinated the popular Poetry & Pizza series in downtown San Francisco. For the last thirty-six years she has taught English and Creative Writing at Skyline College (she started teaching at Skyline in 1978). She served as the faculty editor for the literary magazine, Talisman, for over twenty years. Katharine loves to perform her work, especially when accompanied by jazz musicians.

**Rockaway** by Katharine Harer

They stare at the ocean as if they’re looking for something, a certain curl a ripple a break in the lacy foam that unravels from the hearts of waves

Slowly they undo their pants all the while looking out beyond themselves pull their wet suits on carefully like women easing nylons over their legs all without looking away chests bare and soft the rubber suit flapping at their waists they savor every step that takes them toward the waves

Some run like children boards strapped to their wrists others walk a slow, jagged line disappearing and reappearing patiently stroking the water slipping inside the crashing and coming out whole skimming the thunder slick as glass for as long as it lets them

When they come in and stand dripping by their cars faces calm from the tossing and riding hair tangled a salty wet glaze on their skin when you’d think they’d had enough of water their eyes are still searching the waves
Additional study questions on the poem “Rockaway”:

Questions About Craft:

1. Do you see any examples of figurative language (similes or metaphors) in the poem? Identify one or more examples.

2. What do the similes add to the poem?

3. Do you notice any alliteration in the poem? Identify one or more examples.

4. What does the alliteration add to the poem?

5. Try reading the poem out loud: what do you notice about the sounds and rhythms?

6. Look at some of the poet’s word choices (diction): pick out a few examples of words that help to create the scene and/or the feeling of surfing.

Questions About Structure:

1. Is this poem written in free verse? Explain.

2. Why do you think the poem is organized into four stanzas?

3. Why do you think the poet uses very little punctuation, such as commas and periods? How does the lack of punctuation affect the “feel” of the poem?

Questions About Theme:

1. How does the poem make you feel about the surfers it describes?

2. Notice how the poem begins and ends: what do you think the poet wants to tell us about the surfers?
WHAT ARE LITERARY THEORIES?

Literary theories are different perspectives, or angles, that we use to approach interpreting the literature we read. We can think of literary theories as “lenses” that allow us to “zoom in” on specific ideas, concerns, and issues, rather than on literary forms, conventions, and structures.

In short, literary theories are tools that help us make meaning of the literature we read. Understanding what these theories are and how they work provides us with tools that help us find meaning in what we have read.

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Becoming familiar with literary theories allows us to formulate more focused, meaningful interpretations and ideas. Applying the basic, guiding principles of these theories helps us think critically about the literature and allows us to ask ourselves relevant, meaningful, and focused questions. Once we’ve asked these questions, we can then move on to answering them in a manner that allows us to “zoom in” on key issues and ideas.

Therefore, rather than looking at literature in a very general way, and rather than merely focusing on the technical aspects of a work, literary theories allow us to approach literature in a way that makes it easier for us to interpret and discover meaning than it would be without the guidance of the theories.

Although multiple literary theories exist, it is important for us to remember that interpretations of literature are the result of applying a combination of these theories.

HOW DO I USE THEM IN A PAPER?

Familiarize yourself with basic principles associated with the literary theories and how readers might apply them to the literature they read. Once you have carefully read the assigned poem, play, story, or novel, look over your notes and the annotations you have made in response to the work, and highlight the comments and ideas that stand out for you.

Once you’ve reviewed the ideas in your notes and annotations, go on to ask yourself the following questions:

- Which literary theories can I connect to the ideas and issues I’ve identified?
- How are my ideas reflected in the literary theories?
- Which of my ideas do I want to explore further in relation to those theories?
- How can I further apply the principles of the literary theory or theories to get more meaning from the text and delve deeper into the meaning/ideas I already have?

For more specific questions that might be useful in helping you apply literary theories, take a look at the “Questions to Consider” at the end of each literary theory description below.
THE LITERARY THEORIES:

Historical/Biographical Criticism is a literary lens that allows readers to examine the realities of the historical period reflected in the work and/or the realities of the life and times of the author. To study a work using the historical/biographical literary lens, the reader’s assumption is that the literary work is a reflection of the period in which it was written, and/or that the work is a reflection of the author’s life and times. In other words, the reader assumes that the work has been shaped by historical events of the time (historical) and/or by events in the author’s life (biographical). Approaching a literary work using the historical/biographical perspective requires the reader to engage in supplemental research related to the relevant historical period and the author of the work.

Questions to Consider:

- In what ways do the events and/or characters in the work parallel significant events and/or people represented during the time period or in the author’s life?
- How might the work and its meaning have been shaped by events of the time period in which it was set or written?
- How might the work and its meaning have been shaped by events and/or people in the author’s life?

New Criticism (also known as Formalist Criticism) examines the relationships between the ideas and themes in a literary work and its form. When applying this theory, the reader focuses on exploring the meaning of the literature and the way in which the meaning is conveyed in the text. In other words, the work’s theme/meaning is reinforced and unified in the text’s form (imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other literary elements). In applying the New Criticism as an approach for understanding literature, very close analysis of and focus on the literary text is essential.

Questions to Consider:

- How do imagery and narrative point of view reinforce a theme or idea you’ve identified in the work?
- How does the plot contribute to supporting the meaning of a story you’ve read?

Archetypal Criticism is a literary lens requiring the reader to examine cultural and psychological myths that contribute to the meaning of the texts. As readers apply this theory, they assume that the literature imitates universal dreams of humanity and that recurring images, patterns, symbols, and human experiences, also known as archetypes, contribute to the form and meaning of the work. These archetypes may include what are known as motifs (recurring themes, subjects, ideas).

Questions to Consider:

- What symbols help to illustrate a common, universal struggle experienced by the protagonist of the story?
- How do the actions of the characters and/or the setting of the story reflect events/ideas that we find in other cultural stories and myths?
Gender Criticism (also known as Feminist Criticism) is a literary lens that allows the reader to critique dominant patriarchal and heterosexual language and ideas by exposing how a work reflects masculine, patriarchal, heterosexual ideology. Additionally, the reader may focus on examining how literary works are shaped by and/or convey messages about gender-related issues such as gender identity, sexual orientation, gender roles and expectations, gender dynamics, and gender-related power structures.

Gender criticism encourages readers to examine gender ideology and politics in literature and to critique oppressive patriarchal and masculine structures apparent in literary works.

Questions to Consider:

- In what ways is the work a commentary or critique of the dominant patriarchal ideologies in the society it depicts?
- What ideas about gender are reflected in the work?

Marxist Criticism argues that literature reflects the struggles between oppressed and oppressing classes. Readers applying Marxist criticism focus on examining the representation of socio-economic class structures, marginalization, materialism, class systems, and/or class conflict in literature. Readers also examine the way in which a literary work may espouse oppressive social and class structures.

In applying Marxist criticism, readers tend not to focus heavily on a literary work’s aesthetic or artistic concerns, arguing that meaning is shaped by the work’s depiction of class conflict and class distinctions, as well as its social and political concerns. In reading and critiquing literature, Marxist theorists tend to find themselves sympathetic to the working classes and to authors whose works challenge economic inequalities found in capitalist societies.

Questions to Consider:

- In what ways does the literature depict the struggles between the rich and the poor?
- How is the work be sympathetic to the working class?
- How might the work be a critique or commentary about capitalism?

Deconstruction is an approach that requires readers to challenge the assumption that a work has a single, fixed meaning and that this meaning is accessed only through a close reading of the text alone. Deconstruction involves examining contradictions that exist within a text and accepting the idea that because a text can have a variety of meanings, some meanings may actually contradict others.

Readers employing deconstructionist criticism tend to focus not on what is being said but, rather, on how it is said in the writer’s use of language. Because of this focus on the use of language, deconstructionists rely on a close reading of the text/words in order to make meaning.

Questions to Consider:

- White is a color that typically represents purity and innocence in our culture. How is the color white used to represent ideas that both support and contradict this meaning in the work?
- How might a theme in the work be negated by an opposing theme that also exists within the same work?
**New Historicism** is a literary lens through which readers find meaning by considering the context of the period during which the text was written. Readers who examine literature through a New Historical lens concern themselves with the political, social cultural, economic, and/or intellectual implications of the work.

Questions to Consider:

- How are the politics and policies of the time in which the work was written depicted in the events and characters of the work?
- In what ways are the social norms of the period reflected in the story, poem, play, or novel?

**Cultural Criticism** allows the reader to approach literature with the assumption that the work questions traditional, cultural (typically Western-European) ideologies and values and that most literary works espouse these dominant ideas. With this in mind, those who apply cultural criticism examine how literature challenges Eurocentric-based meaning, particularly by focusing on how works, especially those written by and about traditionally oppressed and/or marginalized groups or sub-groups, expose the identities, systems, values, norms, traditions, etc. of typically under-represented groups.

Questions to Consider:

- How does the work reflect the oppressive environment of the time in which it takes place or in which it was written?
- In what ways is the devaluation and/or marginalization of under-represented groups represented?

**Psychological/Psychoanalytic Criticism** involves the assumption that the work is a reflection of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of the author. The Psychological/Psychoanalytic lens requires readers to delve into the psychology or personality of the author and/or characters to determine the meaning of the work.

Readers employing the psychological/psychoanalytic approach examine the role of unconscious psychological drives/impulses and repressive behaviors in shaping human behavior.

Questions to Consider:

- In what ways does the story reveal the protagonist’s struggle to assert his/her identity?
- How is the work a reflection of an individual’s desire to act according to his/her impulses yet, at the same time, struggle against those impulses?

**Reader-Response Criticism** suggests that the experience of reading and the experiences that the reader brings to the reading determine the meaning of the work. In other words, meaning within literature is created as the reader experiences (reads) the work. As readers bring their own ideas, thoughts, moods, knowledge, and experiences to the text, meaning is created with little emphasis placed on the structural elements of the work (plot, narrative point of view, character, symbol, etc.). The interaction between the reader and the text determines the meaning of the work.

Questions to Consider:

- What attitudes do you and the main character of the story have in common? Have these attitudes led you to similar/different outcomes to those of the main character? How so?
- How would you have responded to the situations the characters find themselves in? Why would you have responded in such a manner?