

LITERARY THEORY & CRITICISM

What is Literary Theory?

- "Literary theory" is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature.
- By literary theory we refer not to the meaning of a work of literature but to the theories that reveal what literature can mean.
- Literary theory is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature.

What is literature criticism?

- Literary criticism is not an abstract, intellectual exercise; it is a natural human response to literature.
- The informal criticism of friends talking about literature tends to be casual, unorganized, and subjective. Since
- Aristotle, however, philosophers, scholars, and writers have tried to create more precise and disciplined ways of discussing literature.
- Literary critics have borrowed concepts from other disciplines, like linguistics, psychology, and anthropology, to analyze imaginative literature more perceptively.
- Some critics have found it useful to work in the abstract area of literary theory, criticism that tries to formulate general principles rather than discuss specific texts.
- Mass media critics, such as newspaper reviewers, usually spend their time evaluating works—telling us which books are worth reading, which plays not to bother seeing.

Critical Approaches to Literature

MORAL CRITICISM (~360 BC-present)

Plato

- ❖ Book X - *Republic*
 - "...poets may stay as servants of the state if they teach piety and virtue, but the pleasures of art are condemned as inherently corrupting to citizens..." (19).
- ❖ Plato believed that art was reproduction of nature:
 - "...what artists do...is hold the mirror up to nature

Aristotle

- ❖ In *Poetics*, Aristotle saw poetry and drama as means to an end.
- ❖ To teach and to delight.

BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

- ❖ Biographical criticism begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work.
- ❖ Anyone who reads the biography of a writer quickly sees how much an author's experience shapes—both directly and indirectly—what he or she creates. Reading that biography will also change (and usually deepen) our response to the work.
- ❖ Sometimes even knowing a single important fact illuminates our reading of a poem or story.
- ❖ Though many literary theorists have assailed biographical criticism on philosophical grounds, the biographical approach to literature has never disappeared because of its obvious practical advantage in illuminating literary texts.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM

- ❖ Historical criticism seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it—a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu.
- ❖ Historical critics are less concerned with explaining a work's literary significance for today's readers than with helping us understand the work by recreating, as nearly as possible, the exact meaning and impact it had on its original audience.
- ❖ A historical reading of a literary work begins by exploring the possible ways in which the meaning of the text has changed over time.
- ❖ The analysis of William Blake's poem "London", for instance, carefully examines how certain words had different connotations for the poem's original readers than they do today.
- ❖ Reading ancient literature, no one doubts the value of historical criticism. There have been so many social, cultural, and linguistic changes that some older texts are incomprehensible without scholarly assistance. But historical criticism can even help us better understand modern texts.

Formalism (1930s-present)

Form Follows Function: Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Neo-Aristotelianism

Formalism

- ❖ "Formalism" is an interpretive approach that emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text.
- ❖ The work of the Formalists had a general impact on later developments in "Structuralism" and other theories of narrative.

- ❖ "Formalism," like "Structuralism," sought to place the study of literature on a scientific basis through objective analysis of the motifs, devices, techniques, and other "functions" that comprise the literary work.
- ❖ The Formalists placed great importance on the literariness of texts, those qualities that distinguished the literary from other kinds of writing. Neither author nor context was essential for the Formalists.
- ❖ "Formalism" is perhaps best known is Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization."

FORMALIST CRITICISM

- ❖ Formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms.
- ❖ "The natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship," René Wellek and Austin Warren wrote in their influential *Theory of Literature*, "is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves."
- ❖ To a formalist, a poem or story is not primarily a social, historical, or biographical document; it is a literary work that can be understood only by reference to its intrinsic literary features—those elements, that is, found in the text itself.
- ❖ To analyze a poem or story, the formalist critic, therefore, focuses on the words of the text rather than facts about the author's life or the historical milieu in which it was written. The critic would pay special attention to the formal features of the text—the style
- ❖ These features, however, are usually not examined in isolation, because formalist critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all of its elements work together to create the reader's total experience.
- ❖ A key method that formalists use to explore the intense relationships within a poem is close reading, a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text.
- ❖ The purpose of close reading is to understand how various elements in a literary text work together to shape its effects on the reader.
- ❖ Since formalists believe that the various stylistic and thematic elements of literary work influence each other, these critics insist that form and content cannot be meaningfully separated.
- ❖ The complete interdependence of form and content is what makes a text literary.

Russian Formalism

- Victor Shklovsky
- Roman Jakobson
- Victor Erlich - *Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine*, 1955
- Yuri Tynyanov

New Criticism

- John Crowe Ransom - *The New Criticism*, 1938

- I.A. Richards
- William Empson
- T.S. Eliot
- Allen Tate
- Cleanth Brooks

Neo-Aristotelianism (Chicago School of Criticism)

- R.S. Crane - *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, 1952
- Elder Olson
- Norman Maclean
- W.R. Keast
- Wayne C. Booth - *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961

Russian Formalism

- ❖ An influential school of literary criticism in **Russia** from the 1910s to the 1930s.
- ❖ These linguistic movements began in the 1920s, were suppressed by the Soviets in the 1930s, moved to Czechoslovakia and were continued by members of the **Prague Linguistic Circle** (including Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, and René Wellek).

Key Words

Dialogism refers to a theory, initiated by Mikhail Bakhtin, arguing that in a dialogic work of literature-- such as in the writings of Dostoevsky

- --there is a "polyphonic interplay of various characters' voices ...

Carnival - "For Bakhtin, carnival reflected the 'lived life' of medieval and early modern peoples.

- In carnival, official authority and high culture were jostled 'from below' by elements of satire, parody, irony, mimicry, bodily humor, and grotesque display. This jostling from below served to keep society open, to liberate it from deadening..."

Heteroglossia - "refers, first, to the way in which every instance of language use – every utterance - is embedded in a specific set of social circumstances, and second, to the way the meaning of each particular utterance is shaped and influenced by the many-layered context in which it occurs"

Monologism - "having one single voice, or representing one single ideological stance or perspective, often used in opposition to the Bakhtinian dialogical.

- In a monological form, all the characters' voices are subordinated to the voice of the author" (Malcolm Hayward).

Polyphony - "a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe a dialogical text which, unlike a monological text, does not depend on the centrality of a single authoritative voice.

- Such a text incorporates a rich plurality and multiplicity of voices, styles, and points of view.
- It comprises, in Bakhtin's phrase, "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Henderson and Brown - Glossary of Literary Theory).

NEW CRITICISM

- ❖ The "New Criticism," so designated as to indicate a break with traditional methods, was a product of the American university in the 1930s and 40s.
 - ❖ "New Criticism" stressed close reading of the text itself, much like the French pedagogical precept "explication du texte."
 - ❖ As a strategy of reading, "New Criticism" viewed the work of literature as an aesthetic object independent of historical context and as a unified whole that reflected the unified sensibility of the artist.
 - ❖ New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and W.K. Wimsatt placed a similar focus on the metaphysical poets and poetry in general, a genre well suited to New Critical practice.
 - ❖ "New Criticism" aimed at bringing a greater intellectual rigor to literary studies, confining itself to careful scrutiny of the text alone and the formal structures of paradox, ambiguity, irony, and metaphor, among others.
 - ❖ The role of the individual response is dismissed as an affective fallacy.
 - ❖ The misconception that arises from judging a piece of literature by the emotional effect that it produces in the reader
 - ❖ Instead, there is an objective corollary that the tension at the core of the text inevitably surfaces through the actions of the characters.
 - ❖ Theory put forward by T.S. Eliot
 - ❖ The role of the critic is to resolve the contradictions to find the right meaning
- **John Crowe Ransom (American)**
 - *The New Criticism*, 1938
 - **I.A. Richards (British)**
 - *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1926)
 - *Practical Criticism* (1929), and
 - *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936).
 - **William Empson (British)**
 - *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).
 - **T.S. Eliot (British)**
 - *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1920)
 - *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920)

○ **Allen Tate (American Poet Laureate from 1943 to 1944)**

○ **Cleanth Brooks (American)**

- *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947)
- *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*(1939)

New Criticism is against the prevailing concern of critics with

- the lives and psychology of authors,
- social background
- literary history.

Procedures followed by New Critics

- A poem should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient object.
- The distinctive procedure is explication or close reading.
- Literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of practical and logical discourse.
- The key concepts of this criticism deal with the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.
- The distinction between literary genres is not essential.

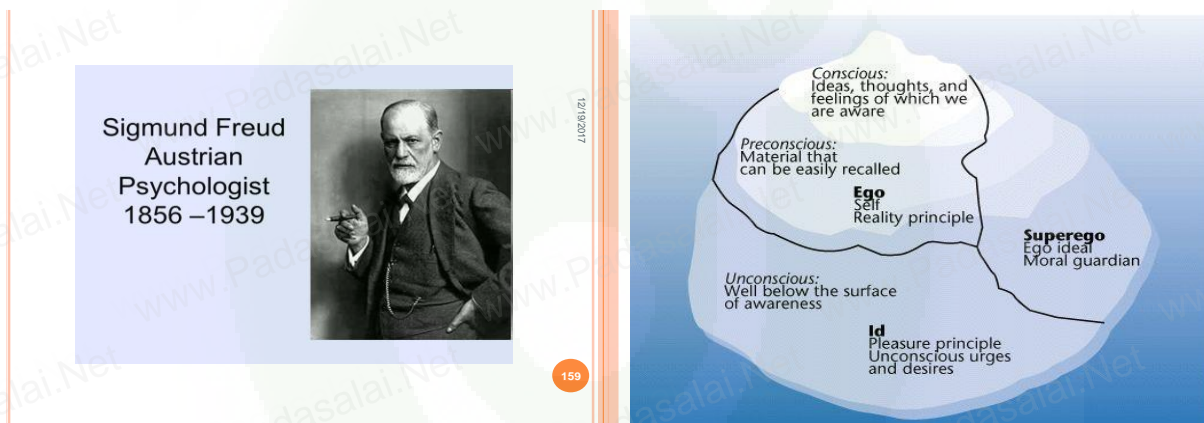
Key Words

- **Intentional Fallacy** - equating the meaning of a poem with the author's intentions.
- **Affective Fallacy** - confusing the meaning of a text with how it makes the reader *feel*. A reader's emotional response to a text generally does not produce a reliable interpretation.
- **Heresy of Paraphrase** - assuming that an interpretation of a literary work could consist of a detailed summary or paraphrase.
- **Close reading** - "a close and detailed analysis of the text itself to arrive at an interpretation without referring to historical, authorial, or cultural concerns".

Psychoanalytic Criticism (1930s-present)

- ❖ Modern psychology has had an immense effect on both literature and literary criticism. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories changed our notions of human behavior by exploring new or controversial areas like wish-fulfillment, sexuality, the unconscious, and repression.
- ❖ Freud also expanded our sense of how language and symbols operate by demonstrating their ability to reflect unconscious fears or desires. Freud admitted that he himself had learned a great deal about psychology from studying literature: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Dostoevsky were as important to the development of his ideas as were his clinical studies. Some of Freud's most influential writing was, in a broad sense, literary criticism, such as his psychoanalytic examination of Sophocles' Oedipus.
- ❖ This famous section of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) often raises an important question for students: was Freud implying that Sophocles knew or shared Freud's theories?

- ❖ In focusing on literature, Freud and his disciples like Carl Jung, Ernest Jones, Marie Bonaparte, and Bruno Bettelheim endorse the belief that great literature truthfully reflects life.
- ❖ Psychological criticism is a diverse category, but it often employs three approaches.
- ❖ First, it investigates the creative process of the artist: what is the nature of literary genius and how does it relate to normal mental functions?
- ❖ The second major area for psychological criticism is the psychological study of a particular artist. Most modern literary biographies employ psychology to understand their subject's motivations and behavior.
- ❖ The third common area of psychological criticism is the analysis of fictional characters. Freud's study of Oedipus is the prototype for this approach that tries to bring modern insights about human behavior into the study of how fictional people act.



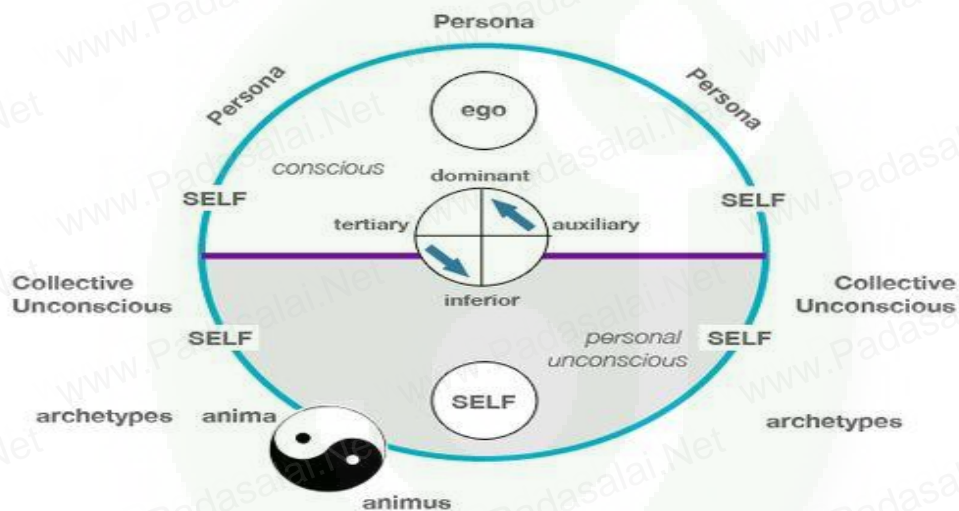
ID, EGO, SUPER EGO

- ❖ Freud maintained that our desires and our unconscious conflicts give rise to three areas of the mind that wrestle for dominance as we grow from infancy, to childhood, to adulthood:
- ❖ id - "...the location of the drives" or libido
- ❖ ego - "...one of the major defenses against the power of the drives..." and home of the defenses listed above
- ❖ superego - the area of the unconscious that houses Judgment (of self and others) and "...which begins to form during childhood as a result of the Oedipus complex"
- ❖ **Oedipus Complex & Electra Complex**
 - **D.H. Lawrence** (Sons & Lovers – **Paul Morel**)
- ❖ **Jungian criticism** attempts to explore the connection between literature and what Carl Jung (a student of Freud) called the "**collective unconscious**" of the human race: "...**racial memory**, through which the spirit of the whole human species manifests itself" (Richter 504).

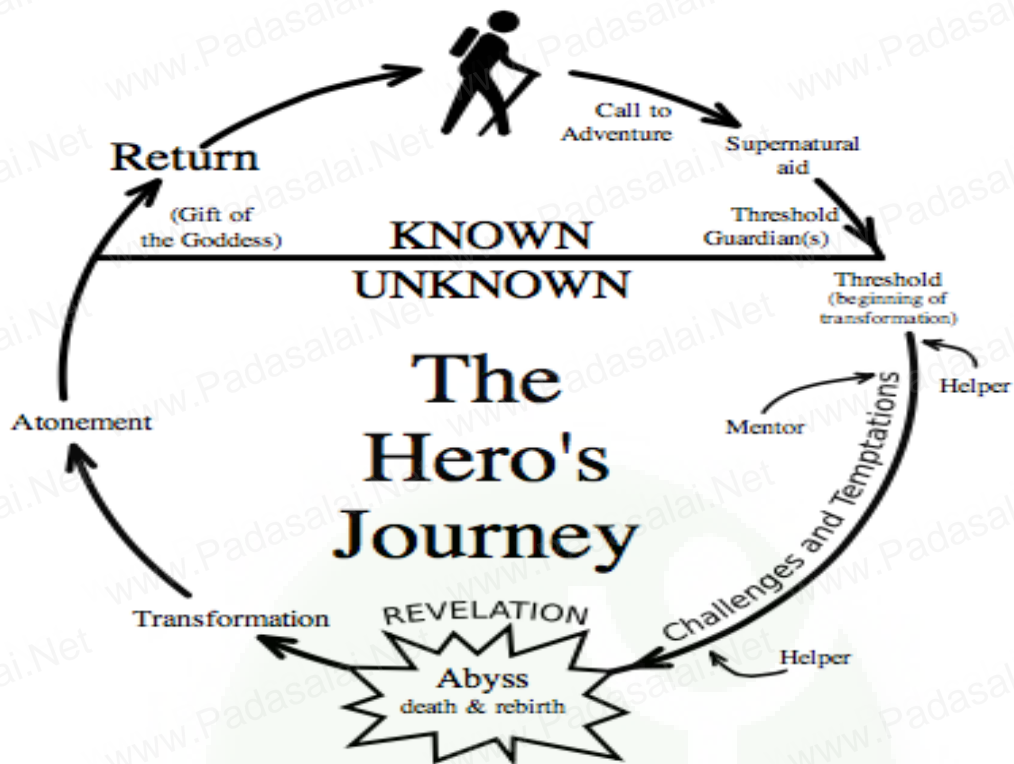
Key Terms

- ❖ **Anima** - feminine aspect - the inner feminine part of the male personality or a man's image of a woman.
- ❖ **Animus** - male aspect - an inner masculine part of the female personality or a woman's image of a man.
- ❖ **Collective Unconscious** - "a set of primal memories common to the human race, existing below each person's conscious mind" (Jung)
- ❖ **Persona** - the image we present to the world
- ❖ **Shadow** - darker, sometimes hidden (deliberately or unconsciously), elements of a person's psyche

Jungian Psyche Model



❖ Source: *Navigating the Seasons of Later Life*, Nancy B. Milner



modern theatre guides

John Osborne's Look Back in Anger



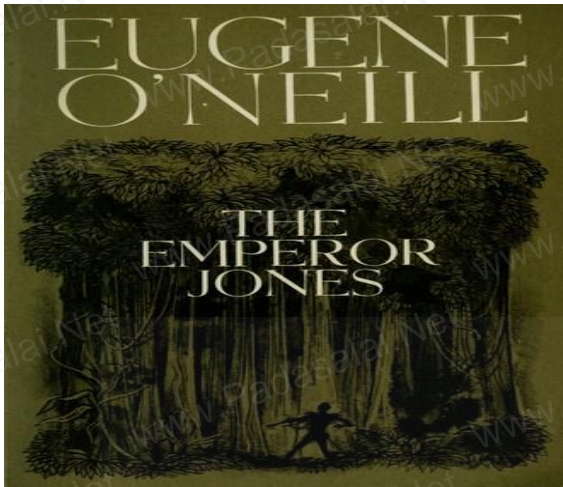
ALEKS SIERZ

LOOK BACK IN ANGER

- o *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is a realist play written by John Osborne.
- o It focuses on the life and marital struggles of an intelligent and educated but disaffected young man of working-class origin, Jimmy Porter, and his equally competent yet impassive upper-middle-class wife Alison.
- o The supporting characters include Cliff Lewis, an amiable Welsh lodger who attempts to keep the peace, and Helena Charles, Alison's snobbish friend.

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THE EMPEROR JONES

- o *The Emperor Jones* is a 1920 play by American dramatist Eugene O'Neill that tells the tale of Brutus Jones, a resourceful, self-assured African American and a former Pullman porter, who kills another black man in a dice game, is jailed, and later escapes to a small, backward Caribbean island where he sets himself up as emperor. The play recounts his story in flashbacks as Brutus makes his way through the jungle in an attempt to escape former subjects who have rebelled against him.