Brief Overview of Critical Theories – VERY BRIEF - 2014

A very basic way of thinking about literary theory is that these ideas act as different lenses critics use to view and talk about art, literature, and even culture. These different lenses allow critics to consider works of art based on certain assumptions within that school of theory. The different lenses also allow critics to focus on particular aspects of a work they consider important.

NOTE: This sheet provides a very brief discussion of the critical theories that you will select from. You will need to do a significant amount of research to develop a solid and working understanding of your chosen theory. A cursory overview will not be adequate given the depth of this assignment.

Select your 1st, 2nd and 3rd choices. Be ready to sign up for your critical theory, tomorrow.

1. **New Criticism** - A literary movement that started in the late 1920s and 1930s and originated in reaction to traditional criticism that new critics saw as largely concerned with matters extraneous to the text, e.g., with the biography or psychology of the author or the work’s relationship to literary history. New Criticism proposed that a work of literary art should be regarded as autonomous, and so should not be judged by reference to considerations beyond itself. A poem consists less of a series of referential and verifiable statements about the ‘real’ world beyond it, than of the presentation and sophisticated organization of a set of complex experiences in a verbal form (Hawkes, pp. 150-151). Basically, it focuses on "objectively" evaluating the text, identifying its underlying form. One may study, for example, a text’s use of imagery, metaphor, or symbolism. New Criticism isn’t concerned with matters outside the text, such as biographical or contextual information.

2. **Feminist Criticism** examines works by women, about women and that simply have female characters. It addresses issues of masculinity/femininity, the differences between the sexes, the marginalization of women and their representation in the works. Feminist criticism is a political activity concerned with fair representation and treatment of women. The goal is to examine the ways in which literary texts reinforce patriarchy. It’s important to not what the work reveals about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy. It is concerned with "...the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson). This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and "...this critique strives to expose the explicit and implicit misogyny in male writing about women" (Richter 1346). It examines how women are portrayed and how these portrayals relate to the gender issues of the period in which the novel was written or is set. Feminist criticism asks whether the work reinforces or undermines patriarchal ideology. The work might be said to have either a patriarchal or a feminist agenda. Texts that seem to both reinforce and undermine patriarchal ideology might be said to be ideologically conflicted.) A critic using Feminist Studies or Gender Studies might ask, "How is gender constructed or deconstructed in this text? Is the view of the text gendered or sexist?" How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of patriarchal norms and values? Does this representation support or undermine these oppressive norms and values?

3. **Marxist Criticism** according to Marxists and to other scholars in fact, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism: think how often the quest for wealth traditionally defines characters. So Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 149). Literature reflects an author’s own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be. You may ask, How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of capitalism and/or classism? Does this representation support or undermine these oppressive socioeconomic ideologies?

4. **Psychoanalytic criticism**: Such criticism aims at uncovering the working of the human mind--especially the expression of the unconscious. Possibilities include analyzing a text like a dream, looking for symbolism and repressed meaning, or developing a psychological analysis of a character. Three ideas found in the work of Sigmund Freud are particularly useful: the dominance of the unconscious mind over the conscious, the expression of the unconscious mind through symbols (often in dreams), and sexuality as a powerful force for motivating human behavior. Psychoanalytic criticism can be applied to either the author/text relationship or to the reader/text relationship. You might ask, How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of the psychological (unconscious mind ) desires, needs, and conflicts of its characters (or the psychological desires, needs, and conflicts of its author or the reader)? Don’t limit your discussion to the tripartite model – address multiple aspects of this theory such as the unconscious mind, defenses, desires, complexes, dreams, etc....
5. **Archetypal/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). Jungian criticism, closely related to Freudian theory because of its connection to psychoanalysis, assumes that all stories and symbols are based on mythic models from mankind’s past. Based on these commonalities, Jung developed archetypal myths, the Syzygy: "...a quaternion composing a whole, the unified self of which people are in search" (Richter 505). These archetypes are the Shadow, the Anima, the Animus, and the Spirit: "...beneath...[the Shadow] is the Anima, the feminine side of the male Self, and the Animus, the corresponding masculine side of the female Self" (Richter 505).

In literary analysis, a Jungian critic would look for archetypes (also see the discussion of Northrop Frye) in creative works: "Jungian criticism is generally involved with a search for the embodiment of these symbols within particular works of art." (Richter 505). When dealing with this sort of criticism, it is often useful to keep a handbook of mythology and a dictionary of symbols on hand. Your discussion must go beyond the Shadow, the Anima, the Animus, and include a discussion of multiple archetypes present in the work.

6. **Postcolonial criticism** Literally, post colonialism refers to the period following the decline of colonialism, e.g., the end or lessening of domination by European empires. Although the term post colonialism generally refers to the period after colonialism, the distinction is not always made. In its use as a critical approach, post colonialism refers to "a collection of theoretical and critical strategies used to examine the culture (literature, politics, history, and so forth) of former colonies of the European empires, and their relation to the rest of the world" (Makaryk 155 - see General Resources below). Among the many challenges facing postcolonial writers are the attempt both to resurrect their culture and to combat preconceptions about their culture. Edward Said, for example, uses the word Orientalism to describe the discourse about the East constructed by the West. When using this theory, a critic might ask, How is the text shaped by its (intentional or unintentional) representation of cultural difference (the ways in which race, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity)? Does this representation support or undermine colonialist ideologies? **Major figures** include Edward Said (sah-EED), Homi Bhabha (bah-bah), Frantz Fanon (fah-NAWN), Gayatri Spivak, Chinua Achebe (ah-CHAY-bay) , Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Jamaica Kincaid, and Buchi Emecheta.