POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY CRITICISM

Critical Theory Recap Lesson
POSTCOLONIALISM “THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK”

• Postcolonialism:—It concerns itself with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries.
• It excludes literature that represents British or American viewpoints.
• It concentrates on writing from colonized cultures that were once dominated by, but remained outside of the political and philosophical tradition of the white male, European culture.
• Postcolonial literature is often referred to as “Third world literature”

• *Postcolonial literature and theory investigate what happens when two cultures clash and when one of them, with its accompanying ideology, empowers and deems itself superior to the other.
Eurocentrism

• use of European culture as the standard to which all other cultures are negatively contrasted—is called Eurocentrism.

• An example of Eurocentric language can be seen in the terms First World, Second World, Third World, and Fourth World to refer to, respectively,
  • (1) Britain, Europe, and the United States;
  • (2) the white populations of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa (and, for some theorists, the former Soviet bloc);
  • (3) the technologically developing nations, such as India and those of Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia; and
  • (4) the indigenous populations subjugated by white settlers and governed today by the majority culture that surrounds them, such as Native Americans and aboriginal Australians (and, for some theorists, nonwhite populations who have minority status in “First World” countries, such as African Americans).
Colonizers

• The colonizers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper “self”;
• native peoples were considered “other,” different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human.
• This practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called othering, and it divides the world between “us” (the “civilized”) and “them” (the “others” or “savages”).
• The “savage” is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the demonic other).
• But sometimes, as we see with many Romantic writers, the “savage” is perceived as possessing a “primitive” beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature (the exotic other).
• In either case, however, the “savage” remains other and, therefore, not fully human.
Authors

• Seminal post-colonial writers such as Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o have written a number of stories recounting the suffering of colonized people.
  • For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe details the strife and devastation that occurred when British colonists began moving inland from the Nigerian coast.

• Rather than glorifying the exploratory nature of European colonists as they expanded their sphere of influence, Achebe narrates the destructive events that led to the death and enslavement of thousands of Nigerians when the British imposed their Imperial government.

• In turn, Achebe points out the negative effects (and shifting ideas of identity and culture) caused by the imposition of Western religion and economics on Nigerians during colonial rule.
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

• Post colonialism develops from a four-thousand-year history of strained cultural relations between colonies in Africa and Asia and the Western world.

• The beginning of post colonialism's theoretical and social concerns can be traced to the 1950s.

• During the 1960s, postcolonial authors and critics began publishing texts which would become the cornerstone of postcolonial writings.

• Many of its adherents suggest there are two branches:—One that views post colonialism as a set of diverse methodologies that possess no unitary quality, as suggested by Homi Bhabha.

• The other view sees postcolonialism as a set of cultural strategies “centered in history”.
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

- The latter group can be subdivided into two branches:
  - Postcolonialism refers to that period after the colonized societies or countries have become independent.
  - Postcolonialism as referring to all the characteristics of a society or culture from the time of colonization to the present moment.
Power, Hegemony, and Literature

• Post-colonial criticism also questions the role of the Western literary canon and Western history as dominant forms of knowledge making.

• The terms "First World," "Second World," "Third World" and "Fourth World" nations are critiqued by post-colonial critics because they reinforce the dominant positions of Western cultures populating First World status.

• This critique includes the literary canon and histories written from the perspective of First World cultures. So, for example, a post-colonial critic might question the works included in "the canon" because the canon does not contain works by authors outside Western culture.
Moreover, the authors included in the canon often reinforce colonial hegemonic ideology, such as Joseph Conrad.

Western critics might consider *Heart of Darkness* an effective critique of colonial behavior. But post-colonial theorists and authors might disagree with this perspective: "...as Chinua Achebe observes, the novel's condemnation of European is based on a definition of Africans as savages: beneath their veneer of civilization, the Europeans are, the novel tells us, as barbaric as the Africans. And indeed, Achebe notes, the novel portrays Africans as a pre-historic mass of frenzied, howling, incomprehensible barbarians..." (Tyson 374-375).
Typical questions:

1. How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression?

2. What does the text reveal about the problematics of post-colonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?

3. What person(s) or groups does the work identify as "other" or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated?

4. What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anti-colonialist resistance?
Typical questions:

5. What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference - the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity - in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?

6. How does the text respond to or comment upon the characters, themes, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) work?

7. Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different post-colonial populations?

8. How does a literary text in the Western canon reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of colonialization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples? (Tyson 378-379)

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/post_colonial_criticism.html
Wherever postcolonial critics place themselves in terms of these debates, however, most interpret postcolonial literature in terms of a number of overlapping topics. These include, among others, the following common topics:

1. The native people’s initial encounter with the colonizers and the disruption of indigenous culture
2. The journey of the European outsider through an unfamiliar wilderness with a native guide
3. Othering (the colonizers’ treatment of members of the indigenous culture as less than fully human) and colonial oppression in all its forms
4. Mimicry (the attempt of the colonized to be accepted by imitating the dress, behavior, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers)
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5. **Exile** (the experience of being an “outsider” in one’s own land or a foreign wanderer)

6. Post-independence exuberance followed by disillusionment

7. The struggle for individual and collective cultural identity and the related themes of alienation, unhomeliness (feeling that one has no cultural “home,” or sense of cultural belonging),
   - double consciousness (feeling torn between the social and psychological demands of two antagonistic cultures), and
   - hybridity (experiencing one’s cultural identity as a hybrid of two or more cultures, which feeling is sometimes described as a positive alternative to unhomeliness)

8. The need for continuity with a pre-colonial past and self-definition of the political future
• **Double consciousness** is a concept that Du Bois first explores in 1903 publication, “The Souls of Black Folk”.

• **Double consciousness** describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.
KEY TERMS

• **colonialism**: The imperialist expansion of Europe into the rest of the world during the last four hundred years in which a dominant imperium or center carried on a relationship of control and influence over its margins or colonies. This relationship tended to extend to social, pedagogical, economic, political, and broadly culturally exchanges often with a hierarchical European settler class and local, educated (compractor) elite class forming layers between the European "mother" nation and the various indigenous peoples who were controlled. Such a system carried within it inherent notions of racial inferiority and exotic otherness.

• **post-colonialism**: Broadly a study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is concerned with both how European nations conquered and controlled "Third World" cultures and how these groups have since responded to and resisted those encroachments. Post-colonialism, as both a body of theory and a study of political and cultural change, has gone and continues to go through three broad stages:
  • an initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority enforced by being in a colonized state
  • the struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy
  • a growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity
KEY TERMS

• **ambivalence**: the ambiguous way in which colonizer and colonized regard one another. The colonizer often regards the colonized as both inferior yet exotically other, while the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable yet corrupt. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse.

• **alterity**: "the state of being other or different"; the political, cultural, linguistic, or religious other. The study of the ways in which one group makes themselves different from others.

• **colonial education**: the process by which a colonizing power assimilates either a subaltern native elite or a larger population to its way of thinking and seeing the world.

• **diaspora**: the voluntary or enforced migration of peoples from their native homelands. Diaspora literature is often concerned with questions of maintaining or altering identity, language, and culture while in another culture or country.

• **essentialism**: the essence or "whatness" of something. In the context of race, ethnicity, or culture, essentialism suggests the practice of various groups deciding what is and isn't a particular identity. As a practice, essentialism tends to overlook differences within groups often to maintain the status quo or obtain power. Essentialist claims can be used by a colonizing power but also by the colonized as a way of resisting what is claimed about them.
KEY TERMS

- **ethnicity**: a fusion of traits that belong to a group—shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviors, experiences, memories, and loyalties. Often deeply related to a person’s identity.

- **exoticism**: the process by which a cultural practice is made stimulating and exciting in its difference from the colonializer’s normal perspective. Ironically, as European groups educated local, indigenous cultures, schoolchildren often began to see their native lifeways, plants, and animals as exotic and the European counterparts as "normal" or "typical."

- **hegemony**: the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all, often not only through means of economic and political control but more subtly through the control of education and media.
KEY TERMS

• **hybridity**: new transcultural forms that arise from cross-cultural exchange. Hybridity can be social, political, linguistic, religious, etc. It is not necessarily a peaceful mixture, for it can be contentious and disruptive in its experience. Note the two related definitions:

  • **catalysis**: the (specifically New World) experience of several ethnic groups interacting and mixing with each other often in a contentious environment that gives way to new forms of identity and experience.

  • **creolization**: societies that arise from a mixture of ethnic and racial mixing to form a new material, psychological, and spiritual self-definition.
KEY TERMS

• **identity**: the way in which an individual and/or group defines itself. Identity is important to self-concept, social mores, and national understanding. It often involves both essentialism and othering.

• **ideology**: "a system of values, beliefs, or ideas shared by some social group and often taken for granted as natural or inherently true" (Bordwell & Thompson 494)
KEY TERMS

• **language**: In the context of colonialism and post-colonialism, language has often become a site for both colonization and resistance. In particular, a return to the original indigenous language is often advocated since the language was suppressed by colonizing forces. The use of European languages is a much debated issue among postcolonial authors.

• **abrogation**: a refusal to use the language of the colonizer in a correct or standard way.

• **appropriation**: "the process by which the language is made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience."
KEY TERMS

• **magical realism**: the adaptation of Western realist methods of literature in describing the imaginary life of indigenous cultures who experience the mythical, magical, and supernatural in a decidedly different fashion from Western ones. A weaving together elements we tend to associate with European realism and elements we associate with the fabulous, where these two worlds undergo a "closeness or near merging."

• **mapping**: the mapping of global space in the context of colonialism was as much prescriptive as it was descriptive. Maps were used to assist in the process of aggression, and they were also used to establish claims. Maps claims the boundaries of a nation, for example.

• **metanarrative**: ("grand narratives," "master narratives.") a large cultural story that seeks to explain within its borders all the little, local narratives. A metanarrative claims to be a big truth concerning the world and the way it works. Some charge that all metanarratives are inherently oppressive because they decide whether other narratives are allowed or not.
KEY TERMS

• **mimicry**: the means by which the colonized adapt the culture (language, education, clothing, etc.) of the colonizer but always in the process changing it in important ways. Such an approach always contains it in the ambivalence of hybridity.

• **nation/nation-state**: an aggregation of people organized under a single government. National interest is associated both with a struggle for independent ethnic and cultural identity, and ironically an opposite belief in universal rights, often multicultural, with a basis in geo-economic interests. Thus, the move for national independence is just as often associated with region as it is with ethnicity or culture, and the two are often at odds when new nations are formed.
KEY TERMS

• **other**: the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group. By declaring someone "Other," persons tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images.

• **race**: the division and classification of human beings by physical and biological characteristics. Race often is used by various groups to either maintain power or to stress solidarity. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was often used as a pretext by European colonial powers for slavery and/or the "white man's burden."

• **semiotics**: a system of signs which one knows what something is. Cultural semiotics often provide the means by which a group defines itself or by which a colonializing power attempts to control and assimilate another group. See: https://signsalad.com/our-thoughts/what-is-semiotics/ for more info.
**KEY TERMS**

- **space/place**: space represents a geographic locale, one empty in not being designated. Place, on the other hand, is what happens when a space is made or owned. Place involves landscape, language, environment, culture, etc.

- **subaltern**: the lower or colonized classes who have little access to their own means of expression and are thus dependent upon the language and methods of the ruling class to express themselves.

- **worlding**: the process by which a person, family, culture, or people is brought into the dominant Eurocentric/Western global society.