

## Critical Worlds



# Critical Worlds

*A Targeted Introduction to Literary  
Analysis*

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COLLEGE OF WESTERN IDAHO



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# About this Book

Welcome to *Critical Worlds: A Targeted Introduction to Literary Analysis*. This book was created for my English 211: Literary Analysis course at the College of Western Idaho. Here is the catalog description of the course:

“This course refines literary analysis skills with emphasis on critical approaches and methods. Students will learn techniques in literary research and apply researched, critical perspectives to a variety of texts.” (CWI)

This textbook is designed for English literature and creative writing majors, especially those planning to transfer to a four-year institution. Our English 211 course also meets the Research and Writing requirement for Liberal Arts majors. One of my primary goals is to prepare you for the work you will do in upper-division literature courses. To accomplish this goal, we will do a substantial amount of reading and writing each week. We will explore literary analysis, a variety of theoretical approaches to literature, and some basic information on literary research. The culmination of this class will be a group-produced critical edition Pressbooks publication, *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*.

## How This Book Is Organized

The book is organized in sections that “target” a specific approach to literary analysis. Each section in this book will do the following:

1. Introduce the critical lens(es), terminology, and scholars

associated with this form of criticism.

2. Engage with an example of a scholarly article from this critical method.
3. Explain how to apply the theory to a specific literary text.
4. Provide an example of how terminology can be used for this lens using a generative artificial intelligence “model” essay. I will also engage in a dialogue with the model essay to show you the limitations and strengths of generative AI in academic writing.
5. Demonstrate how students can use the critical lens with a student essay example.
6. Encourage students to practice the critical lens through texts and guiding questions. In some cases, these guiding questions will encourage the use of generative AI to explore the texts.
7. Provide a narrated lecture with notes to help introduce and review concepts for online students.

## Learning Outcomes

This book was designed to incorporate the course outcomes for English 211, which include the following:

1. Consider a wide range of alternatives to a habitual way of approaching texts
2. Analyze literature with attention to style and form as well as content
3. Use accepted methods of literary research and MLA documentation to integrate others’ ideas respectfully, accurately, and critically
4. Apply a variety of critical strategies in responding to literature
5. Write literary analysis essays using critical approaches and

- incorporating the ideas of others
6. Discuss the significance of cultural, historical, thematic, and theoretical perspectives in interpreting literature
  7. Deliberate over the kinds of political interpretations made when reading and writing about literature

## OER Philosophy and Use of Generative AI

This text represents a collaboration, reuse, and sharing of others' Creative Commons licensed content, including student work. As much as possible, I have tried to create a text with diverse perspectives and writing styles. I invite you to provide feedback as well as using, reusing, or remixing any of the materials in this text in accordance with the terms of their Creative Commons licenses.

As I was writing this textbook, ChatGPT and other new generative artificial intelligence technologies were introduced. I decided to explore how these tools could assist in developing content for OER. I also am experimenting with these tools in crafting assignments for students.

I acknowledge that ChatGPT does not respect the individual rights of authors and artists and ignores concerns over copyright and intellectual property in its training; additionally, I acknowledge that the system was trained in part through the exploitation of precarious workers in the global south. In this work I specifically used ChatGPT to assist me in outlining chapters, explaining basic terminology, drafting model essays, and creating student prompts. I have included links to the chats I used for this book in an appendix.

## Fair Use Statement

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## Accessibility

I created this textbook with accessibility in mind. Instructors can upload the whole text to online learning systems, such as Blackboard, Canvas, and Google Classroom. Because reliable internet access is a problem in rural areas of Idaho where some of my students live, the book can be downloaded in multiple formats including PDF and EPUB or MOBI files. It can also be accessed through text-to-speech readers provided through your learning institutions or other common text to speech tools, such as Read Aloud and Dragon. All videos have subtitles/closed captioning. I have included an accessibility check as part of my revision process. If you encounter any issues, please use the feedback form at the end of this book to report them.

## Land Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the traditional and ancestral lands of the Shoshone-Bannock and the Shoshone-Paiute tribes on which I am teaching, learning, and working today. The struggle for Indigenous rights is deeply connected to human rights. It is important that the stories and traditions from tribal nations are heard, celebrated, and protected.



# Professional Acknowledgements

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- Joy Palmer, Department Chair of English, College of Western Idaho
- Joel Gladd, Department Chair of Integrated Studies, College of Western Idaho
- Jason Roach, OER librarian at the College of Western Idaho
- My wonderful students and writer friends who have contributed to this book.

## About the Author

I am an author, educator, and mother of four children, one of whom has bipolar disorder. My book, *The Price of Silence: A Mom's Perspective on Mental Illness* (Hudson Street Press, 2014), was a "Books for a Better Life" award winner. My essays have appeared in USA Today, the Huffington Post, Psychology Today, Time.com, The Mighty, MindBodyGreen, Good Men Project, and Boise State University's The Blue Review, among others. Since my essay "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" went viral, I have appeared on the Today Show, Good Morning America, Erin Burnett Out Front, Anderson Cooper 360, Don Lemon, Dr.

Oz, the Diane Rehm Show, NPR's Weekend Edition, and other programs. I presented talks on children's mental health and stigma at TEDx San Antonio in October 2013 and at the National Council for Behavioral Health in March 2016. I was featured in the Peabody award-winning HBO documentary *A Dangerous Son* in May 2018 and participated in the 2019 Columbine documentary, *An American Tragedy*. I write about teaching with generative artificial intelligence on my Substack, *Artisanal Intelligence*.

I hold a B.A. in Classics from Brigham Young University (1994); an M.A. in Classics from the University of California, Los Angeles (1997), and an Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership from Argosy University (2016). My dissertation research focused on mental health advocacy and leadership strengths. I am a former Department Chair of Integrated Studies and current associate professor of English at the College of Western Idaho. I am passionate about inclusivity and diversity and believe that education has the power to change lives for the better. You can contact me here: [lizalong@cwidi.edu](mailto:lizalong@cwidi.edu).

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## SECTION I

# INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL WORLDS



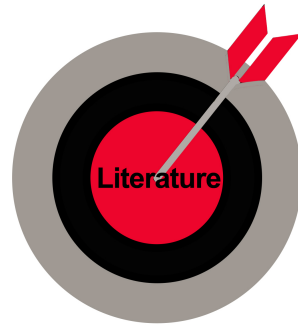
*What is literature and why do we study it? What skills do we need, and how can we apply those skills in other contexts? In the introduction to our textbook, we'll learn more about how literature has traditionally been defined, how literary analysis functions to support those definitions, and how you can*

*become a literary scholar. We will also briefly preview the critical lenses presented in this book. Finally, we'll preview and practice literary analysis using a biographical criticism approach to a text.*



# 1. What Is Literature and Why Do We Study It?

Literary criticism—the formal study of literature—has ancient roots. From Aristotle’s *Poetics* to ibn al Mu’tazz’s *Kitab al Badi*, ancient and medieval scholars were just as curious as we are about what makes something literature. Is it the subject matter? The language? The imagery? The



author’s character? The formal elements such as rhyme and meter? How do you know if something you read is literature? Who decides whether a work is allowed to enter “the canon” and become required reading for students?

In this book created for my English 211 Literary Analysis introductory course for English literature and creative writing majors at the College of Western Idaho, I’ll introduce several different critical approaches that literary scholars may use to answer these questions. The critical method we apply to a text can provide us with different perspectives as we learn to interpret a text and appreciate its meaning and beauty.

The existence of literature, however we define it, implies that we study literature. While people have been “studying” literature as long as literature has existed, the formal study of literature as we know it in college English literature courses began in the 1940s with the advent of New Criticism. The New

Critics were formalists with a vested interest in defining literature—they were, after all, both creating and teaching about literary works. For them, literary criticism was, in fact, as John Crowe Ransom wrote in his 1942 essay “Criticism, Inc.,” nothing less than “the business of literature.”

Responding to the concern that the study of literature at the university level was often more concerned with the history and life of the author than with the text itself, Ransom responded, “the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature. But I think this is what the good students have always wanted to do. The wonder is that they have allowed themselves so long to be denied.”

My goal with this text is that the tools you'll acquire will empower you to *study* literature—that you will no longer feel constrained by definitions of literature that you have learned in the past.

We'll learn more about New Criticism in Section Two. For now, let's return to the two questions I posed earlier.

## What is literature?

First, what is **literature**? I know your high school teacher told you never to look up things on Wikipedia, but for the purposes of literary studies, Wikipedia can actually be an effective resource. You'll notice that I link to Wikipedia articles occasionally in this book. Here's how Wikipedia defines literature:

**“Literature** is any collection of written work, but it is also used more narrowly for writings specifically considered to be an art form, especially prose fiction, drama, and poetry.<sup>[1]</sup> In recent centuries, the definition has expanded to include oral literature, much of which has been transcribed.<sup>[2]</sup> Literature is a method of recording, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and entertainment, and can also have a social, psychological, spiritual, or political role.”

This definition is well-suited for our purposes here because throughout this course, we will be considering several types of literary texts in a variety of contexts.

I’m a Classicist—a student of Greece and Rome and everything they touched—so I am always interested in words with Latin roots. The Latin root of our modern word *literature* is *litera*, or “letter.” Literature, then, is inextricably intertwined with the act of writing. But what kind of writing?

## Who decides which texts are “literature”?

The second question is at least as important as the first one. If we agree that literature is somehow special and different from ordinary writing, then who decides which writings count as literature? Are English professors the only people who get to decide? What qualifications and training does someone need to determine whether or not a text is literature? What role do you as the reader play in this decision about a text?

Let's consider a few examples of things that we would all probably classify as literature. I think we can all (probably) agree that the works of William Shakespeare are literature. We can look at Toni Morrison's outstanding oeuvre of work and conclude, along with the Nobel Prize Committee, that books such as *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* are literature. And if you're taking a creative writing course and have been assigned the short stories of Raymond Carver or the poems of Joy Harjo, you're probably convinced that these texts are literature too.

In each of these three cases, a different "deciding" mechanism is at play. First, with Shakespeare, there's history and tradition. These plays that were written 500 years ago are still performed around the world and taught in high school and college English classes today. It seems we have consensus about the tragedies, histories, comedies, and sonnets of the Bard of Avon (or whoever wrote the plays).

In the second case, if you haven't heard of Toni Morrison (and I am very sorry if you haven't), you probably have heard of the Nobel Prize. This is one of the most prestigious awards given in literature, and since she's a winner, we can safely assume that Toni Morrison's works are literature.

Finally, your creative writing professor is an expert in their field. You know they have an MFA (and worked hard for it), so when they share their favorite short stories or poems with you, you trust that they are sharing works considered to be literature, even if you haven't heard of Raymond Carver or Joy Harjo before taking their class.

(Aside: What about fanfiction? Is fanfiction literature?)



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can*



view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=5#oembed-1>

We may have to save the debate about fan fiction for another day, though I introduced it because there's some fascinating and even literary award-winning fan fiction out there.

Returning to our question, what role do we as readers play in deciding whether something is literature? Like John Crowe Ransom quoted above, I think that the definition of literature should depend on more than the opinions of literary critics and literature professors.

I also want to note that contrary to some opinions, plenty of so-called genre fiction can also be classified as literature. The Nobel Prize winning author Kazuo Ishiguro has written both science fiction and historical fiction. Iain Banks, the British author of the critically acclaimed novel *The Wasp Factory*, published popular science fiction novels under the name Iain M. Banks. In other words, genre alone can't tell us whether something is literature or not.

What I want you to take away from this introduction is that in the past, the answer to the question "Is this literature?" has likely been answered for you. Someone else has made that decision.

In this book, I want to give you the tools to decide for yourself. We'll do this by exploring several different critical approaches that we can take to determine how a text functions and

whether it is literature. These lenses can reveal different truths about the text, about our culture, and about ourselves as readers and scholars.

## **“Turf Wars”: Literary criticism vs. authors**

It's important to keep in mind that literature and literary theory have existed in conversation with each other since Aristotle used Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex* to define tragedy. We'll look at how critical theory and literature complement and disagree with each other throughout this book. For most of literary history, the conversation was largely a friendly one.

But in the twenty-first century, there's a rising tension between literature and criticism. In his 2016 book *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict*, literary scholar Martin Paul Eve argues that twenty-first century authors have developed

a series of novelistic techniques that, whether deliberate or not on the part of the author, function to outmanoeuvre, contain, and determine academic reading practices. This desire to discipline university English through the manipulation and restriction of possible hermeneutic paths is, I contend, a result firstly of the fact that the metafictional paradigm of the high-postmodern era has pitched critical and creative discourses into a type of productive competition with one another. Such tensions and overlaps (or 'turf wars') have only increased in light of the ongoing breakdown of coherent theoretical definitions of 'literature' as distinct from 'criticism' (15).

One of Eve's points is that by narrowly and rigidly defining the boundaries of literature, university English professors have

inadvertently created a situation where the market increasingly defines what “literature” is, despite the protestations of the academy. In other words, the gatekeeper role that literary criticism once played is no longer as important to authors. For example, (almost) no one would call *50 Shades of Grey* literature—but the salacious E.L. James novel was the bestselling book of the decade from 2010-2019, with more than 35 million copies sold worldwide.

If anyone with a blog can get a six-figure publishing deal, does it still matter that students know how to recognize and analyze literature? I think so, for a few reasons.

- First, the practice of reading critically helps you to become a better reader and writer, which will help you to succeed not only in college English courses but throughout your academic and professional career.
- Second, analysis is a highly sought after and transferable skill. By learning to analyze literature, you’ll practice the same skills you would use to analyze anything important. “Data analyst” is one of the most sought after job positions in the New Economy—and if you can analyze Shakespeare, you can analyze data. Indeed.com’s list of top 10 transferable skills includes analytical skills, which they define as “the traits and abilities that allow you to observe, research and interpret a subject in order to develop complex ideas and solutions.”
- Finally, and for me personally, most importantly, reading and understanding literature makes life make sense. As we read literature, we expand our sense of what is possible for ourselves and for humanity. In the challenges we collectively face today, understanding the world and our place in it will be important for imagining new futures.

## Critical theories: A targeted approach to

## writing about literature

Ultimately, there's not one "right" way to read a text. In this book, we will explore a variety of critical theories that scholars use to analyze literature. The book is organized around different targets that are associated with the approach introduced in each chapter. In the introduction, for example, our target is literature. In future chapters you'll explore these targeted analysis techniques:

- Author: Biographical Criticism
- Text: New Criticism
- Reader: Reader Response Criticism
- Gap: Deconstruction (Post-Structuralism)
- Context: New Historicism and Cultural Studies
- Power: Marxist and Postcolonial Criticism
- Mind: Psychological Criticism
- Gender: Feminist, Post Feminist, and Queer Theory
- Nature: Ecocriticism

Each chapter will feature the target image with the central approach in the center. You'll read a brief introduction about the theory, explore some primary texts (both critical and literary), watch a video, and apply the theory to a primary text. Each one of these theories could be the subject of its own entire course, so keep in mind that our goal in this book is to introduce these theories and give you a basic familiarity with these tools for literary analysis. For more information and practice, I recommend Steven Lynn's excellent *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory*, which provides a similar introductory framework.

I am so excited to share these tools with you and see you grow as a literary scholar. As we explore each of these critical worlds, you'll likely find that some critical theories feel more natural or logical to you than others. I find myself much more

comfortable with deconstruction than with psychological criticism, for example. Pay attention to how these theories work for you because this will help you to expand your approaches to texts and prepare you for more advanced courses in literature.

P.S. If you want to know what my favorite book is, I usually tell people it's Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. And I do love that book! But I really have no idea what my "favorite" book of all time is, let alone what my favorite book was last year. Every new book that I read is a window into another world and a template for me to make sense out of my own experience and better empathize with others. That's why I love literature. I hope you'll love this experience too.

## 2. Using Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools in Literary Analysis

Generative artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Gemini can be useful as you learn new ways to engage with literary texts. Some of the critical theories we will study are difficult, and having a personalized tutor will help you to better understand these concepts.

This chapter is an example of hybrid writing, which means I have written some of the text with assistance from

ChatGPT, but I take overall responsibility for the tone and content of the chapter. Hybrid writing like this will likely play a role in most workplaces within the next few years, so I think it's important to practice and reflect on the skills that are most important to us as writers in the age of generative artificial intelligence.

I want to cover a few important skills that you'll learn and practice in this course, exploring ways that generative AI tools can help you to become a better reader and writer in preparation for future college coursework and your career.



*This image of android sheep grazing in a digital meadow was created in a chat with Microsoft Copilot, which uses the DALL-E3 image generator.*

# Practicing Transferable Skills through Literary Analysis

First, let's think about the skills we are building in this course. I like to highlight transferable skills. These are skills that are important for our subject matter—literary analysis—but also have applications in other contexts including your future career, whether or not you end up studying literature as a professional.

These skills are not only crucial for academic success but are also highly sought after in the workplace. Here are some transferable skills that ChatGPT and I agree are important for you to practice in this course:

1. **Critical Thinking:** Analyzing literature requires students to assess arguments, identify underlying themes, and evaluate the credibility of sources. This skill is essential in any field that involves problem-solving or decision-making.
2. **Analytical Reasoning/Problem Solving:** Literary analysis involves breaking down complex texts, identifying patterns, and understanding relationships between different elements of a story. This sharpens analytical reasoning, which is crucial in data analysis, scientific research, and strategic planning. It also helps students to practice problem solving by considering different approaches and strategies to use with texts.
3. **Communication Skills:** By writing essays and discussing literary works, students learn to articulate their thoughts clearly and persuasively. Strong written and verbal communication skills are critical in almost every profession.
4. **Empathy and Emotional Intelligence:** Literature often explores diverse human experiences and emotions. Engaging with these texts helps students develop empathy and emotional intelligence, which are important

for teamwork, leadership, and customer relations.

5. **Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity:** Analyzing literature from different cultures and historical periods can increase students' understanding of diverse perspectives, fostering cultural awareness and sensitivity, an essential mindset in a global workforce.
6. **Attention to Detail:** Close reading of texts enhances students' ability to notice small details that contribute to a larger understanding. This skill is vital in professions requiring precision, such as law, finance, and engineering.
7. **Creativity and Innovation:** Engaging with literary texts encourages imaginative thinking and the ability to see things from multiple perspectives. Creativity is a valuable asset in fields such as marketing, product development, and the arts. Creative writing students in this course should definitely focus on the texts we read and take note of how they work.
8. **Research Skills:** Literary analysis may involve researching historical context, author backgrounds, and critical perspectives. These research skills are applicable in any profession that requires gathering, evaluating, and synthesizing information. Students will also learn to apply different research skills depending on the critical method they choose.

Which of these skills are most important to you personally? Where do you already have strengths? Where do you hope to improve during this course?

## Using Generative AI to Augment, Not Replace, Human Intelligence

Next, let's consider how we might use generative AI tools to assist with the development of these skills. I introduce



generative AI in this course because I believe based on my own experience that using these tools can significantly enhance students' understanding of literature by providing them with new ways to explore, analyze, and engage with texts.

The one thing you should not use a chatbot for is to replace you, the human in this class. If you don't understand why you shouldn't just have a chatbot write your whole discussion response or essay for you, then we need to talk—and we probably will. In my experience teaching with generative AI tools since early 2023, I've found that one thing AI is not particularly good at is writing a meaningful literary analysis. Maybe that's because literature was written by humans, for humans. If you're taking this class, the whole point is to read and write about what you read. If you don't want to do this, then literary analysis is not the right course for you.

I've provided model AI-written essays throughout the book so that you can see for yourself why you should not just have generative AI write your essays for you. These essays are superficially pretty. They “sound” nice, But they are boring. They don't make any interesting points about the work, and they are sometimes factually incorrect.

In short, you should do this work because this is work you love. That's why I read and write.

But chatbots can also be pretty great at improving our understanding of literature and providing us with scaffolding as we climb to new heights with some difficult critical theories. That's why I don't want you to use generative AI tools to replace your own work, but I do want you to use them to augment your work and your understanding of these texts.

Here are some specific ways literature students can use generative AI tools to improve their work in this course:

## Basic Textual Analysis and Interpretation

Students can chat with a generative AI tool to better understand challenging excerpts from a text or critical theory. They can ask for explanations or summaries, helping them better understand difficult language or concepts. I have created custom GPTs using the ChatGPT 4o model to help you understand the critical theories we will learn in this course. By discussing a passage with a chatbot, students can explore multiple interpretations, gaining insights into various ways the text can be understood.

## Literary Themes and Motifs

Students can ask a chatbot to help them identify recurring themes or motifs in a text. I recommend that you try this on your own first, then compare your findings with the chatbot's output to see patterns and connections they might have missed. Don't be afraid to challenge the chatbot or disagree with an interpretation!

## Character Analysis

Students can ask chatbots to help create detailed character profiles, including motivations, relationships, and development throughout the text. Creative writing students should note that chatbots can also work as developmental editors to help them flesh out characters in creative works. Students can also ask chatbots to help them track complex relationships in narratives.

## Historical and Cultural Context Research

Students can use chatbots to quickly gather information on the historical or cultural background of a text, deepening their understanding of the work's context. These tools can also provide summaries of an author's life and other works (when appropriate—not all the critical lenses we study care about the author). Be very careful with how you use chatbots here. Make sure you verify any information with a trusted source—either your own reading of the text, or a scholarly, peer-reviewed source. Even Wikipedia has a better track record of factual accuracy than generative AI.

## Literary Criticism

Students can explore different critical approaches we'll learn in this book (e.g., feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, deconstruction, ecocriticism, etc.) by asking a chatbot to explain how these theories can be applied to a text. Students can also use these tools to brainstorm possible thesis statements or essay topics (see the prompt example in the inset box).

## Essay Writing Assistance

Generative AI tools can help students outline their essays by organizing their thoughts and providing structure for their arguments. Students can also ask AI to write rough drafts of introductions and conclusions that they can later refine and make their own. Chatbots are also pretty good at providing feedback on essay organization and helping with academic tone.

I personally use a custom GPT I created called “TLDR” (Too Long Didn’t Read) to provide three-five key takeaways from essays I write. This helps me to ensure that the points I wanted to make come across clearly to the reader (or at least to the chatbot). You can see examples of this on my Substack, *Artisanal Intelligence*.

## But How Do I Actually Use Generative AI?

I’m so glad you asked! We are all learning together, but for me, writing this textbook was an excellent primer to how to use generative AI tools. You can read through my prompts in the appendix to the book. You’ll notice that when I started out, I was not very good at it, and I struggled to get the results I wanted. I was fortunate to be working with a subject that I know well, and I verified any facts the chatbot gave me with factual sources.

But ultimately, working with ChatGPT to produce this textbook was a fun experience. I felt like I had a personal “writing buddy” to keep me on track, to help me focus my ideas, and to generate ideas for discussion questions about literature. I could have done this work all by myself, but I liked having the support. And writer’s block does not exist as long as you can think of questions to ask.

One useful application of generative AI tools in this course is to have a chatbot help you generate ideas. Below I have drafted (with ChatGPT’s help) an example prompt you could use for an essay, followed by ChatGPT 4o’s response (August 10, 2024). Note that you would not want to write about all of the motifs and themes the chatbot identifies. You would want to choose a single approach that resonates with your own understanding of the book.

When you are working with any generative AI tool, whether you choose ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or Claude (my personal

favorite), giving the chatbot a role helps the chatbot understand the context and the type of response you are looking for. In my example below, I have asked the chatbot to take on the role of a literature professor. This can make the responses more tailored and insightful.

If you're brand new, here are two short training videos I created to explain how to prompt ChatGPT (you'll need to create a free account first) and Microsoft Copilot (you already have an account through your student email).



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=958#oembed-1>*



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=958#oembed-2>*

## Example Prompt and Response

**Prompt:** “As a literature professor, can you help me identify and understand the major themes and motifs in *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro? I’m particularly interested in how these themes are developed through the characters and events, and how the motifs contribute to the overall message of the book.”

**ChatGPT 4o response:**

Certainly! In *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro, several major themes and motifs are woven throughout the narrative, offering a deep exploration of human nature, technology, and the complexities of love and connection. Below, I’ll outline some of the key themes and motifs, along with how they are developed in the story.

### Major Themes:

1. **Artificial Intelligence and Humanity:**
  - Exploration: One of the central themes of *Klara and the Sun* is the exploration of what it means to be human. Through the eyes of Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), Ishiguro

dives into the nature of consciousness, identity, and the ethical implications of AI. The novel raises questions about whether machines can possess human-like qualities such as empathy, understanding, and even a soul.

- Development: Klara's interactions with the human characters, particularly Josie and her family, highlight the complexities of these relationships. Despite being a machine, Klara exhibits a deep desire to understand and connect with humans, challenging the notion that emotions and consciousness are uniquely human traits.

## 2. **Loneliness and Connection:**

- Exploration: The theme of loneliness and the human need for connection is pervasive in the novel. The characters, including Klara, experience isolation in various forms—Josie's illness isolates her from her peers, while Klara, despite being surrounded by people, struggles with her non-human nature that distances her from them.
- Development: The novel explores how the characters seek connection in a world where relationships are increasingly mediated by technology. Klara's relationship with Josie becomes a focal point, as it underscores the tension between genuine human connection and the artificial companionship offered by technology.

### 3. **Sacrifice and Love:**

- Exploration: The theme of sacrifice, particularly in the context of love, is another crucial element of the novel. Klara's devotion to Josie leads her to make significant sacrifices, demonstrating a form of love that blurs the line between human and machine.
- Development: This theme is developed through Klara's actions, such as her attempts to bargain with the Sun to save Josie. Klara's understanding of love and sacrifice is portrayed as deeply altruistic, raising questions about the nature of love and whether it is rooted in human experience or something broader.

### 4. **Mortality and the Fragility of Life:**

- Exploration: Mortality is a recurring theme, particularly through Josie's illness, which serves as a constant reminder of the fragility of life. The novel juxtaposes human mortality with the potential immortality of artificial beings, prompting readers to reflect on what gives life meaning.
- Development: Klara's observations of the world around her, particularly her reverence for the Sun, symbolize a kind of spiritual awareness that contrasts with the clinical, technological world the characters inhabit. This tension underscores the theme of mortality and the search for meaning.



## Key Motifs:

### 1. **The Sun:**

- **Symbolism:** The Sun is a significant motif throughout the novel, symbolizing life, hope, and possibly a higher power. For Klara, the Sun is almost a deity-like figure, representing a source of energy and life.
- **Contribution to Themes:** The Sun's role in Klara's worldview adds depth to the theme of faith and belief, suggesting that even an artificial being can possess a sense of spirituality. It also connects to the theme of mortality, as Klara's reliance on the Sun highlights the dependence all beings—human and artificial—have on external sources of life.

### 2. **Windows and Reflections:**

- **Symbolism:** Windows and reflections are recurring motifs that symbolize the boundary between different worlds—inside and outside, human and machine, reality and perception.
- **Contribution to Themes:** These motifs emphasize the theme of isolation and the desire for connection, as characters often view the world through barriers, both physical and metaphorical. Klara's frequent

observations through windows reflect her status as an outsider looking in, underscoring the novel's exploration of identity and belonging.

### 3. **Illness and Healing:**

- **Symbolism:** Illness, particularly Josie's, is a motif that represents vulnerability and the limitations of both human and artificial life. Healing, on the other hand, symbolizes the desire for control over fate and the boundaries of existence.
- **Contribution to Themes:** The motif of illness ties into the themes of mortality and sacrifice. Klara's attempts to heal Josie highlight the limitations of technology and the profound human fear of losing loved ones, as well as the lengths to which beings (human or artificial) will go to preserve life.

## Overall Message:

The overall message of *Klara and the Sun* revolves around the exploration of what it means to be human in a world where technology increasingly blurs the lines between artificial and natural life. Through its themes and motifs, the novel invites readers to reflect on the nature of consciousness, the need for connection, and the ethical boundaries of technology. Klara's journey serves as a poignant reminder that the essence of

humanity may lie not just in our biology but in our capacity for love, sacrifice, and belief (“As a Literature Professor,” August 10, 2024).

One thing I like to do after reading a response like this is to pick it apart and ask more questions. Do I really agree that this is the overall message of *Klara and the Sun*? I don’t, actually. I think the book uses an unreliable narrator to warn readers about the development of technologies like artificial intelligence without clear ethical guidelines. Make sure you don’t let generative AI tools do your thinking for you. I encourage you to pick apart their responses and disagree, just as I have demonstrated in my annotations to the model essays throughout this text.

## How Do I Acknowledge and Cite My Use of Generative AI Tools?

Again, I am glad you asked. Since we are all learning together, I allow pretty much any use of generative AI that you can think of, with the understanding that you must cite and acknowledge your use. This includes sharing your prompt and the chatbot’s responses, as I did above. Depending on the tool you use, you may be able to share a link to the chat, or you may need to download your chat and save it as an appendix. You can also take screenshots.

You will not be penalized for any AI use in this class as long as you cite and acknowledge (aka show your work). But I may ask you to meet with me to discuss your AI use if I feel that the way you are using these tools is harming your ability to learn and practice the skills covered at the beginning of the chapter.

The specific information on citing generative AI in MLA style

is taken from “Acknowledging and Citing Generative AI in Academic Work” in *Write What Matters* by Liza Long, CC BY 4.0.

One note: it’s important to remember that not all instructors allow students to use generative AI in their assignments. You should check with your individual instructor for their policies. When in doubt, ask!

## Before You Use, Reflect: Why and How Am I Using Generative AI?

As an instructor and a writer, I have found that generative artificial intelligence tools can be helpful to explore ideas, refine research questions, outline arguments, and break down difficult concepts for students. When my students use ChatGPT, I ask them to include a citation to the tool they used and also to provide a brief reflection about how they used ChatGPT and how they checked the information for accuracy. Here is an example of a reflection from Luka Denney’s essay in *Beginnings and Endings*, a student-created open education resource.

For this essay, I used Chat GPT as a resource to give me a summary of the feminist and queer theory analysis lens, “Feminist queer theory is a critical analysis lens that combines feminist theory and queer theory to examine how gender and sexuality intersect and shape social power dynamics. This approach challenges the dominant

cultural norms that promote heteronormativity, gender binary, and patriarchy, which result in marginalizing individuals who do not conform to these norms.” With this, it helped me better understand the material so I could write better essays. This information was accessed on May 6th, 2023.

Reflecting on how and why you are using generative AI can help you to ensure that you are not plagiarizing from this tool. Luka's reflection is an example of an acknowledgement statement, which is separate from a citation. Increasingly, students should become familiar with AI acknowledgement statements and clarify with their instructors when these statements are needed.

## Suggestions for Acknowledging Use of AI

Monash University provides helpful recommendations for how to acknowledge when and how you've used generated material as part of an assignment or project. If you decide to use generative artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT for an assignment, it's a best practice to include a statement that does the following:

- Provides a written acknowledgment of the use of generative artificial intelligence.
- Specifies which technology was used.
- Includes explicit descriptions of how the information was generated.

- Identifies the prompts used.
- Explains how the output was used in your work.

The format Monash University provides is also helpful. Students may include this information either in a cover letter or in an appendix to the submitted work.

I acknowledge the use of [insert AI system(s) and link] to [specific use of generative artificial intelligence]. The prompts used include [list of prompts]. The output from these prompts was used to [explain use].

## Citing AI Chatbots in MLA Style

As noted above, many chatbots will allow you to share links to your specific chats. It's a best practice to include those links in your Works Cited. When links are not available, download the conversation or take screenshots and attach it as an appendix to your work. Here's an example of a shared chat link in ChatGPT 3.5. When you click on the link, you'll be able to see both the author's prompts and the chatbot's responses. Including links provides transparency for your writing process.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) uses a template of core elements to create citations for a Works Cited page. MLA asks students to apply this approach when citing any type of generative AI in their work. They provide the following guidelines:

- Cite a generative AI tool whenever you paraphrase, quote,

or incorporate into your own work any content (whether text, image, data, or other) that was created by it.

- Acknowledge all functional uses of the tool (like editing your prose or translating words) in a note, your text, or another suitable location.
- Take care to vet the secondary sources it cites. (MLA)

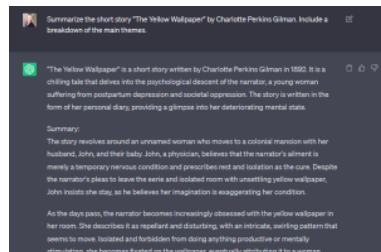
Here are some examples of how to use and cite generative AI with MLA style:

### *Example One: Paraphrasing Text*

Let's say that I am trying to generate ideas for a paper on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." I ask ChatGPT to provide me with a summary and identify the story's main themes. Here's a link to the chat. I decide that I will explore the problem of identity and self-expression in my paper.

#### **My Paraphrase of ChatGPT with In-Text Citation**

The problem of identity and self expression, especially for nineteenth-century women, is a major theme in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman ("Summarize the short story").



#### **Works Cited Entry**

"Summarize the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Include a breakdown of the main themes" prompt. ChatGPT. 24 May Version, OpenAI, 20 Jul. 2023, <https://chat.openai.com/share/d1526b95-920c-48fc-a9be-83cd7dfa4be5>

## *Example Two: Quoting Text*

In the same chat, I continue to ask ChatGPT about the theme of identity and self expression. Here's an example of how I could quote the response in the body of my paper:

When I asked ChatGPT to describe the theme of identity and self expression, it noted that the eponymous yellow wallpaper acts as a symbol of the narrator's self-repression. However, when prompted to share the scholarly sources that formed the basis of this observation, ChatGPT responded, "As an AI language model, I don't have access to my training data, but I was trained on a mixture of licensed data, data created by human trainers, and publicly available data. OpenAI, the organization behind my development, has not publicly disclosed the specifics of the individual datasets used, including whether scholarly sources were specifically used" ("Summarize the short story").

It's worth noting here that ChatGPT can "hallucinate" fake sources. As a Microsoft training manual notes, these chatbots are "built to be persuasive, not truthful" (Weiss & Metz, 2023). The May 24, 2023 version will no longer respond to direct requests for references; however, I was able to get around this restriction fairly easily by asking for "resources" instead.

When I ask for resources to learn more about "The Yellow Wallpaper," here is one source it recommends: "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper: A Symptomatic Reading" by Elaine R. Hedges: This scholarly article delves into the psychological and feminist themes of the story, analyzing the narrator's experience and the implications of the yellow wallpaper on her mental state. It's available in the journal "Studies in Short Fiction." ("Summarize the short story").

Using Google Scholar, I look up this source to see if it's real.



Unsurprisingly, this source is not a real one, but it does lead me to another (real) source:

Kasmer, Lisa. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper': A Symptomatic Reading." *Literature and Psychology* 36.3 (1990): 1.

**Note: ALWAYS check any sources that ChatGPT or other generative AI tools recommend.**

## A Checklist for Acknowledging and Citing Generative AI Tools

In conclusion, it's important to follow these five steps if you are considering whether or not to use and cite generative artificial intelligence in your academic work:

1. Check with your instructor to make sure you have permission to use these tools (in this class, you do).
2. Reflect on how and why you want to use generative artificial intelligence in your work. If the answer is "to save time" or "so I don't have to do the work myself," think about why you are in college in the first place. What skills are you supposed to practice through this assignment? Will using generative artificial intelligence really save you time in the long run if you don't have the opportunity to learn and practice these skills?
3. If you decide to use generative artificial intelligence, acknowledge your use in an appendix.
4. Cite your use of generative artificial intelligence both in text and on a Works Cited page.
5. Always check the information provided by a generative artificial intelligence tool against a trusted source. Be especially careful of any sources that generative artificial intelligence provides.

These tools are rapidly evolving and have the potential to transform the way that we think and write. But just as you should not use a calculator to solve a math equation unless you understand the necessary steps to perform the calculation, you should also be careful about “outsourcing” your thinking and writing to ChatGPT.

## Works Cited

Denney, Luka. “Your Body, Your Choice: At Least, That’s How It Should Be.” *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*, 2023, <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/beginnings-and-endings-a-critical-edition/chapter/feminist-5/>.

Long, Liza. “Acknowledging and Citing Generative AI in Academic Work.” *Write What Matters*, 2023. <https://idaho.pressbooks.pub/write/chapter/citing-generative-ai-in-academic-work/>

Modern Language Association. “How Do I Cite Generative AI in MLA Style?” *MLA Style Center*, Accessed 17 Mar. 2023, <https://style.mla.org/citing-generative-ai/>.

Monash University. “Acknowledging the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence.” *Monash University*, Accessed 17 Mar. 2023, <https://www.monash.edu/learnhq/build-digital-capabilities/create-online/acknowledging-the-use-of-generative-artificial-intelligence>.

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Weiss, Kenneth, and Cade Metz. “When A.I. Chatbots Hallucinate.” *The New York Times*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/business/ai-chatbots-hallucination.html>.



# 3. What Is Biographical Criticism?

*This chapter will demonstrate how subsequent chapters will be organized throughout the book.*

At some point in your educational journey, you've probably been asked to write a book report. As part of that report, you probably did some brief research about the author's life to better understand what factors influenced his/her/their work.



## Critical Lens: Biographical Criticism

When we look at biographical or historical information to help us interpret the author's intent in a text, we are practicing *historical* or *biographical criticism*. With this type of criticism, popular throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the author—and the author's intent—are the targets of our analysis. We read the text in tandem with the author's life, searching for clues about what the author meant within the words of the text and life events. Throughout most of literary history, this is what we meant when we talked about literary criticism or literary analysis.

## Learning Objectives

- Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation (CLO 2.3)
- Emphasize what the work does and how it does it with respect to form, content, and context (CLO 2.4)
- Provide a thoughtful, thorough, and convincing interpretation of a text in support of a well-crafted thesis statement (CLO 5.1)

## Applying Biographical Criticism to a Text

As a refresher on how this type of criticism works, let's look at a poem by African American poet Phyllis Wheatley written in 1772 and published in 1773.

## To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth

BY PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,  
Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn:  
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,  
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:  
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,  
Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,  
While in thine hand with pleasure we behold  
The silken reins, and Freedom's charms unfold.  
Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies

She shines supreme, while hated faction dies:  
Soon as appear'd the Goddess long desir'd,  
Sick at the view, she languish'd and expir'd;  
Thus from the splendors of the morning light  
The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.  
No more, America, in mournful strain  
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,  
No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,  
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,  
Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,  
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.  
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give  
To all thy works, and thou for ever live  
Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,  
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,  
But to conduct to heav'n's refulgent fane,  
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,  
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,  
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

Wheatley's literary talent was recognized and celebrated by her contemporaries. Here's a brief biographical sketch written nearly 60 years after her death from *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Color* by A. Mott (1839):

## A Short Account of Phillis Wheatley

1. Although the state of Massachusetts never was so deeply involved in the African slave trade as most of the other states, yet before the war which separated the United States of America from Great Britain, and gave us the title of a free and independent nation, there were many of the poor Africans brought into their ports and sold for slaves.



*Image of Phyllis Wheatley  
attributed to Scipio Moorhead.  
Public Domain*

2. In the year 1761, a little girl about 7 or 8 years old was stolen from her parents in Africa, and being put on board a ship was brought to Boston, where she was sold for a slave to John Wheatley, a respectable inhabitant of that town. Her master giving her the name of Phillis, and she assuming that of her master, she was of course called Phillis Wheatley.

3. Being of an active disposition, and very attentive and industrious, she soon learned the English language, and in about sixteen months so perfectly, that she could read any of the most difficult parts of the Scriptures, to the great astonishment of those who heard her. And this she learned without any school instruction except what was taught her in the family.

4. The art of writing she obtained by her own industry and curiosity, and in so short a time that in the year 1765, when she was not more than twelve years of age, she was capable of writing letters to her friends on various subjects. She also wrote to several persons in high stations. In one of her



communications to the Earl of Dartmouth, on the subject of *Freedom*, she has the following lines:

“Should you, my lord, while you pursue my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood—  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate,  
Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?  
Steel’d was that soul, and by no misery mov’d,  
That from a father seized the babe belov’d.  
Such, such my case—and can I then but pray,  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?”

5. In her leisure moments she often indulged herself in writing poetry, and a small volume of her composition was published in 1773, when she was about nineteen years of age, attested by the Governor of Massachusetts, and a number of the most respectable inhabitants of Boston, in the following language:

6. “We, whose names are under-written, do assure the world that the Poems specified in the following pages were, (as we verily believe,) written by Phillis, a young negro girl, who was but a few years since, brought an uncultivated barbarian from Africa; and has ever since been, and now is, under the disadvantage of serving as a slave in a family in this town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.”\*

7. Her master says—“Having a great inclination to learn the Latin language, she has made some progress in it.”

8. After the publication of the little volume mentioned, and about the 21st year of her age, she was liberated; but she continued in her master’s family, where she was much respected for her good conduct. Many of the most respectable inhabitants of Boston and its vicinity, visiting at the house, were

pleased with an opportunity of conversing with Phillis, and observing her modest deportment, and the cultivation of her mind.

9. When about 23, she was married to a person of her own colour, who having also obtained considerable learning, kept a grocery, and officiated as a lawyer, under the title of Doctor Peters, pleading the cause of his brethren the Africans, before the tribunals of the state.

10. The reputation he enjoyed, with his industry, procured him a fortune; but Phillis being much indulged, had not acquired sufficient knowledge of domestic concerns; and her friends continuing their particular attention to her, gave him uneasiness, which operating on a disposition that was not willing to have her more respected than himself—which first manifested itself by reproaches; which were followed by harsh treatment. The continuance thereof affecting her susceptible mind, and delicate constitution, she soon went into a decline, and died in 1780, about the 26th year of her age, much lamented by those who knew her worth. She had one child, which died very young; and her husband survived her only three years.

*\*Most of her poetical productions have a religious or moral cast; all breathe a soft and sentimental feeling. Twelve related to the death of friends. Others on the works of Providence; on virtue, humanity and freedom; with one to a young painter of her own colour. On seeing his works, she vented her grief for the sorrows of her country men, in a pathetic strain.*

## Biographical Criticism Applied

You read the poem by Phyllis Wheatley before you learned more about the poet's life. Now that we have both the text and the biographical information about Wheatley, consider the following questions:

- What literary elements of the poem stand out to you?
- How would you describe the author's intent?
- How does reading the poet's biography change or impact your understanding of the poem?

When writing an analysis using this lens, you'll want to start by sharing a brief biography of the text's author, including anything relevant to your understanding of the poem. A thesis statement might look something like this:

In her poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth," Phyllis Wheatley's childhood experiences with slavery impact the choice of imagery and metaphor, focusing on ideas of freedom and democracy that were denied to many contemporary eighteenth century African Americans.

This thesis statement would then be supported from the text. Some examples of things you might use for support include the following:

1. The description of freedom (capitalized) in the first stanza.
2. The imagery of the goddess Athena, associated with the birthplace of democracy, in the second stanza.
3. The description of slavery and the author's appreciation for freedom in the third stanza.

Using this evidence along with biographical information about Phyllis Wheatley, including her education and her experiences, you could write an essay showing how the author's intent, to celebrate freedom, is supported by her life history.

# What Are the Limitations of Biographical Criticism?

While it can be interesting and fun to speculate about how the Bronte sisters' real lives influenced their sometimes uncanny plots, there are several limitations and drawbacks to this kind of criticism.

1. **History is unreliable.** With the Phyllis Wheatley poem and biography above, I provided you with one of the earliest known examples of a biography about this influential African American poet. Because she was enslaved, the lens through which her contemporaries and subsequent biographers viewed her was shaped by prejudice and bias. When we do biographical criticism, we have to assume that there are stable facts about history—and as we will learn later in this book, that's a pretty big assumption.
2. **We cannot really know the author's intent.** While it's true that most creative writing students are told to "write what you know," ultimately, any scholar who asserts that they can really know what an author was thinking in a particular text is not telling the truth. Even authors sometimes change their minds about what they write and why they write it. For example, the poet Sarah Holbrook, whose poems were used on public school standardized tests, complained that she was not able to answer the test questions correctly about her own poems! In an essay for the *Washington Post*, Holbrook asked:

**Does this guessing game mostly evidence:**

- A the literacy mastery of the student?
- B the competency of the student's teacher?
- C the absurdity of the questions?

**D** the fact that the poet, although she has never put her head in an oven, definitely has issues.

Let's go with **D** since I definitely have issues, including issues with these ridiculous test questions (Holbrook).

Ascribing authorial intent where it does not exist is sometimes referred to in later forms of literary criticism as the "intentional fallacy."

**3. Literature has universal meaning.** Focusing on the author's history or biography detracts from the idea that a text can mean something to anyone from any time or place.

Consider this English translation of a poem from the Tang Dynasty (701-762 CE) Chinese poet Li Bai (also known as Li Po):

Your grasses up north are as blue as jade,  
Our mulberries here curve green-threaded branches;  
And at last you think of returning home,  
Now when my heart is almost broken....  
O breeze of the spring, since I dare not know you,  
Why part the silk curtains by my bed?

We don't have to know anything about the author or his cultural context to understand that this poem is about loss of a loved one. The poem speaks to us at a universal level about an emotion we can all recognize, using powerful imagery to convey a sense of loss.

## Practicing Biographical Criticism

You'll have the opportunity to practice biographical criticism with your first week writing assessment. I recommend that you review the Model AI Essay in the next chapter and also review MLA style requirements prior to submitting your response. This

will be the only time we use biographical criticism in the course.

*Biographical Criticism: Natasha Tretheway's "Theories of Time and Space"*

- Write a brief (1-2 page) analysis of Natasha Tretheway's poem "Theories of Time and Space" using biographical criticism as your lens
- Format your paper in MLA style
- Due Sunday Week One

## Further Reading

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by S.H. Butcher.  
<https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>
- Arnold, Matthew, Ricks, Christopher (ed.), *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, New York: New American Library, 1972. OCLC6338231
- Benson, Jackson J. "Steinbeck: A Defense of Biographical Criticism". *College Literature*. Vol. 16, No. 2: 107–116, 1989. JSTOR 25111810.
- Frye, Herman Northrop (1947) *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, OCLC 560970612
- Johnson, Samuel. *Lives of the Poets Volume 1* at Project Gutenberg
- Lynn, Stephen. *Texts and Contexts*. 2007.
- Stuart, Duane Reed. "Biographical Criticism of Vergil since the Renaissance." *Studies in Philology*. Vol. 19, No. 1: 1–30,

1922..JSTOR4171815.

## 4. Generative AI Model Essay

Throughout the book, I have included generative artificial intelligence essays using the free version of ChatGPT (3.5 at the time of this writing).

Before you read further, I want to make sure we are on the same page about how to use this tool in literary analysis: **Generative artificial intelligence and large language models should not replace human writing.**

However, these models can help us to understand how to use terminology effectively and how to structure essays. For each model AI essay in this book, I've used the same poem: John Donne's "The Canonization." I chose this poem because I think it's brilliant, and it's also tough. It's a poem I am still wrestling with, so I wanted to see how generative artificial intelligence could help me to improve my understanding of and approach to the text.

Read through this poem first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.



# The Canonization (1633, Posthumous)

BY JOHN DONNE

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,  
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,  
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,  
Take you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honor, or his grace,  
Or the king's real, or his stampèd face  
Contemplate; what you will, approve,  
So you will let me love.  
Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?  
What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?  
Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?  
When did my colds a forward spring remove?  
When did the heats which my veins fill  
Add one more to the plaguy bill?  
Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still  
Litigious men, which quarrels move,  
Though she and I do love.  
Call us what you will, we are made such by love;  
Call her one, me another fly,  
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,  
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.  
The phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us; we two being one, are it.  
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love.  
We can die by it, if not live by love,  
And if unfit for tombs and hearse  
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;  
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,  
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;

As well a well-wrought urn becomes  
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,  
And by these hymns, all shall approve  
Us canonized for Love.  
And thus invoke us: "You, whom reverend love  
Made one another's hermitage;  
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;  
Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove  
Into the glasses of your eyes  
(So made such mirrors, and such spies,  
That they did all to you epitomize)  
Countries, towns, courts: beg from above  
A pattern of your love!"

## Model Essay Prompt and Artificial Intelligence Literacy

Learning how to prompt artificial intelligence tools is an important part of developing artificial intelligence literacy, which is already becoming an essential workplace skill. In a 2022 literature review of artificial intelligence uses in higher education, Laupichler et al. define artificial intelligence literacy as "the ability to understand, use, monitor, and critically reflect on AI applications without necessarily being able to develop AI models themselves" (1). One of my goals in this textbook is to get you thinking about how generative artificial intelligence can help you as a scholar of literature.

I have linked to the prompts I used to assist me in writing this textbook here. One of the things I like about viewing these prompts in chronological sequence is that it demonstrates my own path toward AI literacy.

Here is the prompt I wrote for the biographical criticism model essay:

*You are an English literature major. You have been asked to write a short essay on John Donne's poem "The Canonization" using biographical criticism as your analytical approach. You will need to read the text below and also consider facts about John Donne's life and how they are reflected in the poem. Also consider the author's intent and explain how the author's life illuminates this intent in the text. Some facts to consider include the following: John Donne fell in love with his employer Thomas Egerton's niece Anne More. He secretly married her against both her uncle and her father's wishes in 1601. Because of the marriage, Donne was thrown in prison but was later released. His employer also dismissed him. Donne was not reconciled with his father in law until 1609. John and Anne proved to be true soul mates. They had ten surviving children. He mourned her death in 1617 in his 17th Holy Sonnet. Please use this information in your analysis. Please also use terminology appropriate to biographical criticism such as author intent.*

## Model AI Essay: Biographical Criticism

### "Love Defiant: Unraveling John Donne's 'The Canonization' Through

## Biographical Lens”

In John Donne’s poem “The Canonization,” the speaker passionately defends his love against external criticisms, asserting the validity and sanctity of his relationship. Employing biographical criticism allows us to delve into Donne’s personal life, particularly his tumultuous love story with Anne More, and understand how his experiences influenced the poem.

Donne’s marriage to Anne More was marked by societal disapproval, leading to his imprisonment and dismissal from his employer, Thomas Egerton. The initial lines of the poem, “For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,” reflect the defiance against societal norms that Donne faced during his own love affair. The speaker’s plea to be allowed to love despite external judgments resonates with Donne’s own struggles against societal restrictions.

The references to physical ailments such as “palsy” and “gout” can be interpreted metaphorically, representing the challenges and obstacles Donne faced in his personal life due to his forbidden love. The mention of “ruined fortune” alludes to the repercussions Donne suffered, including imprisonment and loss of employment. The poem becomes a poignant expression of Donne’s defiance and resilience in the face of societal censure.

The speaker’s rhetorical questions about the harm caused by his love mirror Donne’s own introspection on

the consequences of his marriage. The imagery of “merchant’s ships” and “tears” emphasizes the profound impact of his emotions on his surroundings, mirroring Donne’s own experiences of personal turmoil affecting not only himself but those around him.

The poem progresses to affirm the transformative power of love, presenting the speaker and his beloved as united souls, transcending societal expectations. Donne’s personal reconciliation with Anne More, despite the initial hardships, finds resonance in the lines, “Call us what you will, we are made such by love,” emphasizing the transformative and unifying nature of their relationship.

The references to the phoenix and the eagle and dove further highlight the speaker’s belief in the elevated and enduring nature of their love. Donne, drawing from his own experiences, presents love as a force that can defy societal norms, leading to a harmonious and eternal union.

In the final stanza, Donne contemplates the possibility of being “canonized for Love.” This can be interpreted as a desire for societal recognition and acceptance of their love story. The invocation at the end, urging others to seek a pattern of their love, reflects Donne’s intent to immortalize his own experiences, seeking validation and understanding from the society that once condemned him.

In conclusion, by applying biographical criticism to John Donne’s “The Canonization,” we gain a deeper understanding of the poem’s nuances and the author’s intent. Donne’s personal struggles and triumphs in love

are intricately woven into the fabric of the poem, transforming it into a powerful expression of defiance, resilience, and the enduring nature of true love.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/f1488dba-9448-4213-99bc-e2392bf4bfeb>

You can see how this tool can be a good starting point for literary analysis, but while it may give you some ideas about structure, your own essay will be much more interesting, more specific, and less generic/conventional than this AI-written one. Read through the same essay with my highlighted annotations below. I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice biographical criticism.

## Annotations: “Love Defiant: Unraveling John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’ Through Biographical Lens”

In John Donne’s poem “The Canonization,” the speaker passionately defends his love against external criticisms, asserting the validity and sanctity of his relationship. Employing **biographical criticism** allows us to delve into Donne’s **personal life**, particularly his tumultuous love story with Anne More, and understand **how his experiences influenced the poem**.

One of the things we will learn in this course is that summary is not analysis. A literary analysis needs to make an argument about the text that is supported with evidence. In biographical criticism, this will be both evidence from the text itself and evidence about the author’s life. For most of the other critical methods we will use in this class, we’ll use a sentence similar to

the first one in this AI essay. Instead of talking about the author, we'll talk about the poem's speaker. However, in biographical criticism, we *want* to talk about the author. I would revise the first sentence like this: In his famous poem, "The Canonization," seventeenth-century English poet John Donne passionately defends his love against external criticisms, asserting the validity and sanctity of his marriage to Anne More. This first paragraph is also missing a clear thesis statement that makes an argument. As with many student essays, I was able to find a good thesis statement in the essay's *conclusion*: "Donne's personal struggles and triumphs in love are intricately woven into the fabric of the poem, transforming it into a powerful expression of defiance, resilience, and the enduring nature of true love." In your own papers, please make sure you have a thesis statement that makes an argument at the end of your introduction. You can restate the thesis in the conclusion.

Donne's marriage to Anne More was marked by **societal disapproval**, leading to his imprisonment and dismissal from his employer, Thomas Egerton. The initial lines of the poem, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," reflect the **defiance against societal norms** that Donne faced during his own love affair. The speaker's plea to be allowed to love despite external judgments resonates with Donne's own struggles against societal restrictions.

Again, instead of the speaker, with this type of criticism, we would assume the speaker is Donne (but don't make that assumption in the next chapter!). Also, for all work you do in this course, please make sure you follow MLA guidelines for citing poetry like this: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," (Line 1). Finally, in biographical criticism, these ideas are not well supported because we know the poem was published posthumously, so it would not have shown public defiance of social norms.

The **references to physical ailments** such as "palsy" and "gout" can be interpreted metaphorically, representing the

challenges and obstacles Donne faced in his personal life due to his forbidden love. The mention of “ruined fortune” **alludes to the repercussions Donne suffered**, including imprisonment and loss of employment. The poem becomes a poignant expression of Donne’s defiance and resilience in the face of societal censure.

In the first part of this paragraph, the AI really misses the mark. What it doesn’t know (apparently), and what I did not tell it was that John Donne was nearly 30 and Anne was just 17 when they were married. I guess these lines *could* be interpreted metaphorically, but in biographical criticism, it makes a lot more sense to interpret them literally as proof of his age. The AI is correct about the references to “ruined fortunes” though.

The speaker’s rhetorical questions about the harm caused by his love mirror **Donne’s own introspection** on the consequences of his marriage. The imagery of “merchant’s ships” and “tears” emphasizes the profound impact of his emotions on his surroundings, mirroring Donne’s own experiences of personal turmoil affecting not only himself but those around him.

I think the “merchant’s ships” line is more likely to refer to Donne’s employment, and again, the speaker’s rhetorical questions mirror Donne’s introspection because in this type of criticism, they *are* Donne’s own introspection.

The poem progresses to affirm the transformative power of love, presenting the speaker and his beloved as united souls, transcending societal expectations. Donne’s **personal** reconciliation with Anne More, **despite the initial hardships**, finds resonance in the lines, “Call us what you will, we are made such by love,” emphasizing the transformative and unifying nature of their relationship.

The AI is getting some facts wrong here again. The reconciliation I asked it to consider was between Donne and his father-in-law, not Donne and his wife. If you don’t carefully



check “factual” statements, you will likely run into trouble with these tools. I do like the interpretation of the lines “Call us what you will” though (but remember to cite the line numbers).

The references to the phoenix and the eagle and dove further highlight the speaker’s belief in the elevated and enduring nature of their love. **Donne, drawing from his own experiences, presents** love as a force that can defy societal norms, leading to a harmonious and eternal union.

This is a good example of using imagery to support an interpretation. We will learn more about this when we look at New Criticism in Part Two. A biographical criticism approach might also consider why the author chose these two images. All three are birds, and the phoenix was metaphorical. Was bird imagery like this common in seventeenth-century English poetry? This paragraph is also the first time the AI has really used the the formal requirements of biographical criticism by attributing the poem directly to the author and his experiences.

In the final stanza, **Donne contemplates** the possibility of being “canonized for Love.” This can be interpreted as a desire for societal recognition and acceptance of their love story. The invocation at the end, urging others to seek a pattern of their love, reflects **Donne’s intent to immortalize his own experiences**, seeking validation and understanding from the society that once condemned him.

So here’s the thing. The poem’s title refers to sainthood. Another important thing to consider about Donne’s historical circumstances and his marriage to Anne is that her uncle and father disapproved of his religion. At this time, Protestants and Catholics were still at odds in England. A good biographical criticism essay would definitely address the religious angle, especially given the poem’s title and subject. It would also include a works cited page and rely on outside sources for information about Donne.

In conclusion, **by applying biographical criticism** to John

Donne's "The Canonization," we gain a **deeper understanding** of the poem's nuances and the **author's intent**. Donne's **personal struggles and triumphs in love** are intricately woven into the fabric of the poem, transforming it into a powerful expression of defiance, resilience, and the enduring nature of true love.

I have one favor to ask about your concluding paragraphs: please do not start with "In conclusion." As noted above, the essay's actual thesis seems to be the last line of the essay. You will need a strong thesis statement as the last 1-2 sentences of your introduction.

## You Try It!

Choose one of your favorite poems. Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that uses biographical criticism to analyze the poem you chose. You'll probably need to look up the author to provide the AI with some biographical context, as I did in my prompt above. Then analyze the essay. Is biographical criticism correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses biographical criticism as a critical method and applies it to the poem you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

# 5. Critical Worlds

## Lecture Notes and Presentation



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=264#oembed-1>

### Slide 1: Critical Worlds

Welcome! I'm Dr. Liza Long and in this presentation for English 211, I'm going to go over the critical theories we will cover in your textbook for this course, *Critical Worlds: A Targeted Introduction to Literary Analysis*. You should have already read the first part, "What Is Literature?" and the second part, "Historical/Biographical Criticism," before viewing this presentation. In this presentation, we will look at a variety of critical methods that we're going to explore in this course.

### Slide 2: Biographical Criticism

I will use this target image throughout the course to indicate the central goal for each type of analysis. Let's start with Historical/Biographical Criticism. With this critical lens, the

Author is at the center of our target. I'm willing to bet that you've encountered this type of critical approach previously. Maybe you wrote a book report in middle school or high school, or you have written a college essay exploring a literary text by focusing on how the text shows the author's intent. I asked you to attempt this lens in your first-week writing assessment.

For hundreds of years, when we talked about literary analysis, what we meant was biographical analysis. We looked at the text through the lens of author intent. What did the author mean when they wrote this text? What elements from their background and culture help us to identify that meaning? How does the author's life illuminate the text? The key term for this type of criticism is author intent. But as any of you who have followed the lengthy debate about who wrote Shakespeare's plays certainly knows, there can be some drawbacks to this kind of criticism. Can we ever truly know the author? And more importantly for literary analysis, does author intent even matter? Stop and think about that last question for a minute. It's going to shape many of the approaches we take to texts in this course, starting with New Criticism.

## **Slide 3: New Criticism**

New Criticism is the "business" of literature. In his 1937 essay "Criticism, Inc.," which introduced the term New Criticism for the first time, literature professor John Crowe Ransom argues that "Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic." New Criticism, then, emerged as a methodology for approaching literature with the TEXT as the center of our target. It no longer mattered what the author intended, or who the author was. Instead, the New Critic looks at the words themselves. We're looking for complexity, first and foremost: richness, tension, paradox, beautiful language, or profound insights. Then we examine how that complexity leads to a unity

of purpose in the work. How does all that richness and tension and paradox and language work to give us a central idea or a central meaning? We might consider things like metaphor, point of view, diction, repetition of language, or imagery as we do this type of criticism. If this feels somewhat familiar to you, I am not surprised, especially if you went to high school in the United States. This type of approach is what you may have used in English 190 or English 175 or a similar college level literature appreciation course.

You'll take a very valuable tool from this type of criticism, one that you'll use with every other method we study in the course. This is the technique of close reading. It's an in-depth examination of the text that focuses on individual elements of style.

## **Slide 4: Reader Response**

If the author doesn't matter, what about the reader? The next type of criticism we'll learn in this class is reader response theory. Again, this will likely feel familiar to you if you've ever been asked to write your response to a book or play or poem. I personally enjoy this approach to literature because the center of the target is me, the reader. Well, actually, there are two types of reader response theory. The reader might be me, which is called subjective reader response. How am I responding to the text, and why? Or the reader might be the expected reader or the implied reader, the so called "normal," reader of the text. I think normal is a setting on a washing machine, but I think you all know what I mean.

I hope you'll experiment with both methods. When we get to that section of the book, you'll have a chance to try this out. Some of the questions you might ask for subjective reader response include:

How am I responding to this idea or language? What is this

make me think and what am I expecting to happen next? We take close reading from New Criticism, and we take subjective reader response from this critical lens. Going forward, you should examine your own response to every text we study.

For receptive reader response, which is the more common type that we see in scholarship, you may consider how a specific audience would react to a text. For example, would men and women react differently to the Barbie movie? Why?

## **Slide 5: Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism**

The next type of criticism will blow your mind. Deconstruction is my personal favorite type of literary analysis. We look briefly at structuralism before we get into deconstruction because it's necessary to have at least a brief knowledge of structuralism to understand how deconstruction, also sometimes called poststructuralism, works. I spend a lot more time in my Survey of World Mythology class talking about structuralism because Levi-Strauss's work in looking at binary structures as paths to meaning is really useful when we analyze the structure of myths.

But we don't see many structuralist approaches to literature anymore. Deconstruction is a method that evolves from structuralism's attempt to find universal meaning and blows it up. There can be no shared meaning. The center of the target for deconstruction thus becomes the gap in meaning between what the author might have intended to say, and what any reader takes from the text. Just as with New Criticism, the text is central to the idea of deconstruction, but we'll take a different and expanded approach in our analysis. As with New Criticism, deconstruction starts with a close reading of the text but with a very different goal. Rather than looking for unity,

we're going to look for ways in which the text undermines its own meaning. The basic idea is that meaning is relative. With deconstruction, you'll look for these kinds of gaps, exploring how the text undercuts its own stated meaning.

## **Slide 6: New Historicism and Cultural Studies**

The next two types of literary criticism lens we will explore are New Historicism and Cultural Studies. Let's look at New Historicism first. With this approach, we will be looking at the context to the work as the center of our analysis. How is this different from historical criticism? It differs in several ways. While we still don't necessarily consider author intent, we will need to think about the author's biography. Who wrote it? What was the time period like? How does that context illuminate the text? One important difference from historical criticism is the idea, taken from deconstruction, that there are no "stable" facts in history. You may have heard the phrase, "History is written by the victors." That's what we mean here—that history itself is a text, and that cultural context inevitably shapes the writing of that text.

Instead of thinking of history as a set of facts, we will start thinking about it in terms of the discourse, a word first used by French philosopher Michel Foucault. Discourse encompasses the idea that cultural norms shape texts. As an example, consider William Shakespeare. If we looked at Shakespeare's historical reception and compared it to how Shakespeare is understood today, we would find several differences. How did the discourse during Shakespeare's life affect the writing and performance of his plays? Today, women play the female roles, but during his time, these roles were played by men. The state of Florida just outlawed that. These are examples of differences

in cultural norms. With New Historicism, we will be looking at texts as just one of many types of cultural artifacts.

Cultural studies is similar to New Historicism in that it focuses on the context of a work, but it also has us take an interdisciplinary approach to literary texts. We might consider a variety of factors such as class, ethnicity, race, gender, ideology, or nationality of an author or literary period. As with New Historicism, cultural studies approaches treat literary texts as artifacts of the culture in which they were produced and received.

## **Slide 7: Marxist/Materialist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies**

Marxist/Materialist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies are similar to New Historicism and Cultural Studies, but here, instead of centering the context, we are specifically concerned with power structures in a society and how these influence texts. That's why I've put "power" in the center of the target. Marxism is the term American scholars use for critical analysis that considers socioeconomic class in texts. Cultural Materialism is the same type of criticism, but this term is more widely used in the U.K. and has some overlaps with cultural studies. With a Marxist lens, we follow the money: who has it, and who doesn't. How does wealth and capital (and access to these) shape literary texts, both in terms of what is written and in terms of what is distributed?

With postcolonial criticism, we will be looking at relationships between dominant and dominated cultures. For example, we might look at Indian authors during the British colonial occupation. Many cultural studies approaches fall under this type of analysis. This type of criticism expands on ideas about



privileged voices that first emerged as part of deconstruction. Who gets to write texts? Who gets to read them?

Finally, ethnic studies are ways for us to consider a specific marginalized group's literature. For example, we could study African American or Chicano/a writers.

## **Slide 8: Psychological Criticism**

Psychological criticism: thank goodness it's not just Freud! Full disclosure, Freud is not my favorite. But certainly we have to acknowledge Freud's importance in this area of literary analysis. With psychological criticism, we're looking at the text as a window to the human mind. What can that text illuminate about our minds? The author's mind? Psychological criticism focuses on human behavior and what the text says about that. The most classic example of course, is the Oedipus complex, which comes from Freud and his interpretation of Oedipus Rex, the Greek tragic hero who married his mother and killed his father. Hamlet is another text that is often used to support this kind of criticism.

I do want to stress that it's much more than Freud. You could really take any psychological theory and apply it to a text. We'll have a chance to practice with a few. I really love Jung and his archetypes. Maslow's hierarchy of needs might be familiar to you, or you may be interested in Eric Erickson's theories of child development or Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief. Any psychological framework could be used with the text. The focus will always be the mind what reading the text through this framework illuminates about the mind.

## Slide 9: Gender Criticisms

Our study of critical theories that focus on gender will introduce us to three types of criticism: feminist, post-feminist, and Queer Theory. Each of these will be looked at in detail later in the course. In feminist criticism, we're looking at gender and power structures at the center of our target. For all three types of criticism, we'll consider the significance of gender stereotypes. With feminist criticism, we'll do this at a basic binary (male/female) level. Post-feminism is a deconstructive approach to feminist criticism, where we turn those gender stereotypes on their heads, we say that the text itself undercuts male/female stereotypes. Queer Theory takes it one step further, questioning the very existence of a gender binary and looking at how gender and sexuality and our cultural assumptions about these things impact both how texts are written and how they are read.

## Slide 10: Ecocriticism

Our final exploration of critical lenses will look at ecocriticism, an increasingly popular approach to literary texts. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach to a text that considers the relationship of humans to the natural world. This type of criticism usually focuses on some aspect of the natural world and how this functions in a literary text. Ecocriticism approaches are often related to concerns about climate change. The text doesn't have to be new: we could look at Moby Dick or even the Latin poet Vergil's bucolic poetry through an ecocriticism lens.

Though the term "ecocriticism" was not coined until 1978 by William Rueckert, American authors and philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are both cited as

influences in this type of approach to texts. Ecocriticism has taken on a special relevance and urgency in light of the undeniable effects of human-caused climate change, but it's not all doom and gloom: scholars also focus on resilience in nature and how literary texts reflect this.

## **Slide 11: You Practice**

This was a quick overview of the approaches to literary analysis that we will cover throughout this course. Now it's time for you to practice! For your first essay, you'll choose from one of these three poems. Start by doing a close reading of the poem, including numbering the lines. Use the New Criticism section of Critical Worlds as your guide. You'll find more detailed information about your essay in Blackboard.

Here is a link to the PowerPoint: Critical Worlds Introduction.pptx

## 6. Feedback

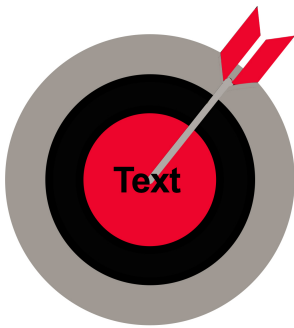
I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cw.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=287>*

## SECTION II

# TEXT: NEW CRITICISM AND THE "BUSINESS" OF LITERATURE

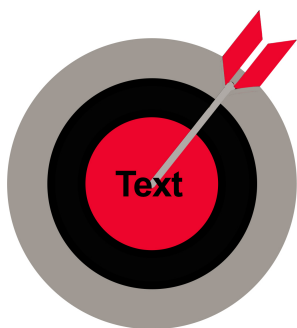


*New Criticism focuses on analyzing a literary work in isolation, emphasizing close reading to uncover meaning through the text's form, structure, and language, rather than relying on external factors such as author intent or historical context. In the following chapters, you will learn more*

*about this type of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*



## 7. What Is New Criticism?



When most college students think about analyzing a literary text, terms like *symbol*, *imagery*, *meter*, *rhyme*, *alliteration*, and *metaphor* may come to mind. These are all critical terms that became important for literary analysis with the advent of New Criticism.

New Criticism is a literary theory that emerged in the United States in the early 20th century, primarily in the 1930s and 1940s, as part of an attempt to help readers understand the “right” way to interpret a literary text. Unlike biographical criticism, New Criticism focuses on close reading and analysis of the text itself, rather than taking into account the author’s background or historical context.

New Critics believe that a work of literature should be viewed as a self-contained and self-referential entity—“a poem should not mean but be”—and that the meaning of the text can be discovered through careful examination of its language, structure, and imagery in the text. These scholars emphasize the ambiguity and complexity of language, believing that when multiple meanings can be found in a text, this complexity contributes to the work’s aesthetic value. According to Stephen Matterson, “Rather than calling it a critical movement, New Criticism may be better described as an

empirical methodology that was, at its most basic and influential, a reading practice” (166).

The New Critics also emphasize the importance of irony and paradox, arguing that like ambiguity and complexity, these elements contribute to the depth and richness of a text. As noted above, they reject the use of information that is outside the text as a means to understand the text. This means that the author’s biography or historical context *do not matter* when we are interpreting a work of literature.

Prominent New Critics include Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. While New Criticism declined in popularity in the 1960s, its influence can still be seen in literary criticism today.

## Learning Objectives

- Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation (CLO 2.3)
- Emphasize what the work does and how it does it with respect to form, content, and context (CLO 2.4)
- Understand how to perform close readings of texts (CLO 4.2)
- Provide a thoughtful, thorough, and convincing interpretation of a text in support of a well-crafted thesis statement (CLO 5.1)



## An Excerpt from New Criticism Scholarship

Read the following excerpt from the article “Criticism, Inc.” by John Crowe Ransom before proceeding with this chapter:

Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities.

Scientific: but I do not think we need be afraid that criticism, trying to be a sort of science, will inevitably fail and give up in despair, or else fail without realizing it and enjoy some hollow and pretentious career. It will never be a very exact science, or even a nearly exact one. But neither will psychology, if that term continues to refer to psychic rather than physical phenomena; nor will sociology, as Pareto, quite contrary to his intention, appears to have furnished us with evidence for believing; nor even will economics. It does not matter whether we call them sciences or just systematic studies; the total effort of each to be effective must be consolidated and kept going. The studies which I have mentioned have immeasurably improved in understanding since they were taken over by the universities, and the same career looks possible for criticism.

Rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals. Perhaps I use a distasteful figure, but I have the idea that what we need is Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd.

What Ransom proposes here is a new approach to literary

criticism, one founded on the idea that there are universal things about literature that can be observed and measured, just as we can observe and measure things in science. This approach to literature does not require us to know anything at all about the author in order to undertake literary analysis of a text. It does, however, require training and mastery of literary analysis techniques, starting with the close reading. Conveniently, this training can only be undertaken in universities, led by qualified English professors.

## Close Reading: An Important Tool for All Kinds of Criticism

Close reading is an important tool developed by the New Critics that we will use in all our approaches to literature going forward. Close reading is a method of literary analysis that involves careful and detailed examination of a text in order to uncover its meaning and significance. Elaine Showalter describes close reading as “slow reading, a deliberate attempt to detach ourselves from the magical power of story-telling and pay attention to language, imagery, allusion, intertextuality, syntax and form.” She compares close reading to “a form of defamiliarisation we use in order to break through our habitual and casual reading practices” (Teaching Literature, 98).

Scholars typically engage in close reading by following a systematic process that involves the following steps:

1. **Selecting a text:** Scholars choose a text to analyze, often one that is particularly complex or has multiple layers of meaning.
2. **Reading the text:** The scholar reads the text carefully and attentively, paying close attention to the language, form, and structure of the work. When working with poetry,

scholars number the lines if this has not already been done.

3. **Analyzing literary devices:** The scholar identifies and analyzes literary devices such as metaphor, simile, imagery, and symbolism, as well as elements of form and structure such as meter, rhyme, and stanza.
4. **Identifying patterns:** The scholar looks for patterns and repetitions within the text, such as repeated words or images, and considers their significance.
5. **Making connections:** The scholar considers how different parts of the text relate to one another, and how the text as a whole relates to larger themes or ideas.
6. **Formulating interpretations:** The scholar develops interpretations of the text based on their close reading, drawing on evidence from the text to support their claims.

Overall, close reading is a rigorous and systematic process that requires careful attention to detail and a deep understanding of the literary devices and elements of form and structure that contribute to a text's meaning and significance. The idea is that scholars will find unity in the complexity of a literary text. Texts that lack complexity are not considered to be literature (and we can infer that they are not worth our study).

## Applying New Criticism Techniques to Literature

As I mentioned previously, literary criticism develops in conversation with literature, and perhaps one of the best examples of this concept with respect to New Criticism is the 1926 poem “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish.

This poem positions itself in the shadow of the Latin poet Horace’s “Ars Poetica.” But it does something very different. Instead of *telling* us how to write poetry, the poem *shows* us

how to write poetry. Its deceptively simple structure, with couplets and slant rhymes, uses imagery and metaphor to demonstrate how to read and write a poem—how to practice the art of poetry. As Steven Lynn, author of *Texts and Contexts*, notes: “Only the poem can tell us how to read the poem” (51).

The complexity, irony, metaphors, oppositions, and tensions in this poem all predict the types of textual elements that will become important to the New Critics and their attempts to make a scientific practice of literary criticism.

Do a close reading of the poem below (we’ll do this together in class or as part of the recorded lecture for this chapter). After you complete your close reading of the poem and find evidence from the text, ask yourself, “So what? Who cares?” The answer to this question may help you to formulate a thesis statement that makes an argument about the text, using New Criticism as your critical method.

### Example: “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish (1926)

A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit,  
Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb,  
Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—  
A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.

\*

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs,  
Leaving, as the moon releases  
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,  
Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,  
Memory by memory the mind—  
A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs.

\*

A poem should be equal to:  
Not true.  
For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.  
For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—  
A poem should not mean  
But be.

Here are some questions to consider as you analyze the poem:

1. **Form and Structure:** Examine the form and structure of “Ars Poetica.” Is it written in a specific form? Comment on the poem’s overall structure, noting features of its overall organization (stanzas, breaks, etc.). Analyze the impact of the chosen form on the poem’s meaning and effectiveness. How does the form contribute to the poem’s meaning?
2. **Meter and Rhythm:** Investigate the poem’s meter and rhythm. Does the poem follow a specific metrical pattern, such as iambic pentameter? Or is it free verse? Analyze the impact of the poem’s rhythm on its tone and mood.
3. **Genre and Intertextuality:** Explore the genre of “Ars Poetica.” Discuss any intertextual references or allusions

within the poem that enrich its meaning or create interplay with other literary works.

4. **Rhyme and Sound Devices:** Analyze the poem's rhyme scheme. Identify any patterns or variations in rhyme, and examine their impact on the poem's overall structure and tone. Discuss the effective use of sound devices, such as alliteration, assonance, or onomatopoeia, and their contribution to the poem's auditory experience.
5. **Imagery and Figurative Language:** Examine the use of imagery in "Ars Poetica." Identify specific examples of vivid or striking imagery and discuss their significance in conveying the poem's central ideas. Identify and analyze figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, or personification, and consider their role in creating layers of meaning.
6. **Themes and Philosophical Exploration:** Identify and explore the major themes present in "Ars Poetica." Discuss how the poem delves into the essence and purpose of poetry, touching upon topics such as brevity, timelessness, emotional truth, and the transformative power of art.

Note: Make sure to support your analysis with specific textual evidence from the poem. Use line numbers to refer to specific parts of the text.

After completing a close reading of the text, you'll want to come up with a thesis statement that you can support with the evidence you've found.

**Example of New Criticism thesis statement:** The extensive use of metaphor in "Ars Poetica" shows what poetry is instead of telling us, leading to the

inevitable conclusion that poems exist outside of any attempt to understand their meaning,

As mentioned in the questions above, MacLeish's poem alludes to the Latin poet Horace's treatise, *Ars Poetica*, an early work of literary criticism. Of poetry, Horace writes this:

"In the choice of his words, too, the author of the projected poem must be delicate and cautious, he must embrace one and reject another: you will express yourself eminently well, if a dexterous combination should give an air of novelty to a well-known word....

It is not enough that poems be beautiful; let them be tender and affecting, and bear away the soul of the auditor whithersoever they please....

As is painting, so is poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance: one loves the dark; another, which is not afraid of the critic's subtle judgment, chooses to be seen in the light;"

How does MacLeish's poem compare to Horace's description of poetry? If you've been paying attention, you may object that this question would not be appropriate to a New Criticism analysis of the poem because we don't consider the context, but in this case, Horace is definitely fair game because the title of the poem is an allusion to the well-known Classical text. When citing works in New Criticism scholarship, you may want to research any allusions you find.

## New Criticism's Critics: The Limitations of New Criticism

While New Criticism was an important development in literary criticism, this approach also has its limitations. According to Gerald Graff, “The New Critics’ attempt to emulate the empirical scientists by employing an objective, analytic method for literary texts was judged as one more symptom of the university’s capitulation to the capitalist-military industrial-technological complex” (72-73). But Graff also argues that New Criticism was much more than just objective close reading of a text—that the critic’s search for unity in the text was also a search for unity *with* the text. In other words, while New Critics sought to separate reader from text, this is an impossible task.

While New Criticism is certainly an important step in development of modern critical theories, there are also several limitations to this approach. First, this type of criticism assumes that the text is universal—that it has one universal meaning. For example, maybe you had to read *The Great Gatsby* in high school. I love this book. And I still remember the multiple choice test I took on it where there was one right answer to the question about what the green light at the end of the dock symbolized. If you’ve ever taken a multiple choice test on a poem or a book, chances are your teacher took a New Criticism approach. Remember again that the goal is to find empirical and scientific ways to evaluate literature. That means we have to be able to find the “right” answer.

A second rather obvious limitation is something that we all know intuitively: how the text affects you, the individual reader, *does matter!* With New Criticism, because the text is all we need to understand the text, we don’t take individual readers or their different experiences into account.

But we never read the same text the same way twice. Think about a book you’ve read more than once over the course



of your life. Because you are not the same person when you reread the book, your experience of reading it will inevitably be different. Consider your response to Natasha Tretheway's poem "Theories of Time and Space." Many readers think this poem is hopeful, and you can certainly support that reading with evidence from the text. Other readers, myself included, think the poem is melancholy—that it's basically about death. That reading is also supported by the text. How you read this—or any—text will depend on your individual experiences.

Ultimately, both of these concerns reveal a flaw in this empirical, scientific approach to literature. In the homogenous literary culture that existed in the 1920s-1950s, the same people were writing literature, reading literature, teaching literature, and evaluating literature. In Western societies, those people happened to be white men. This does not mean that the literature produced during this period isn't amazing. It is! I love T.S. Eliot and Archibald MacLeish. But you can see how it's much easier to find universal meaning when you're in a closed circle of people who all were educated in the same way, read the same types of books, and are now teaching others the things they learned.

When we talk about exploding the canon, this is what we mean. By allowing new voices to enter these literary spaces, it's no longer quite so easy to find a universal meaning in every text. These limitations of New Criticism ultimately led to the development of several other critical theories we will learn about in this course.

## New Criticism Scholars

These are some influential practitioners of New Criticism.

- John Crowe Ransom *The New Criticism*
- I.A. Richards *Practical Criticism*
- T.S. Eliot “Hamlet and His Problems” and “Tradition and Individual Talent”
- Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Fiction* and *Understanding Poetry*
- Rene Wellek and Robert Penn Warren’s *Theory of Literature*
- Richard Ohmann, “Teaching and Studying Literature at the End of Ideology.”

## Further Reading

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## 8. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Model Essay

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

## Model AI Essay: New Criticism

### “Exploring Love and Devotion: A New Criticism Analysis of John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

“The Canonization” is a poem written by John Donne in the early 17th century. The poem explores the theme of love and the speaker’s desire to be recognized as a true lover by his beloved. Using the New Criticism approach, we can analyze the poem’s form, imagery, and tone to understand the deeper meaning behind the words.

The form of the poem is that of a sonnet, a traditional form often used to express love and admiration. The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg, which creates a sense of symmetry and balance. This structure reinforces the theme of love as something that is perfect and harmonious.

The imagery in the poem is rich and varied, with the speaker using a variety of metaphors to express his feelings. He compares love to a “religion” and refers to himself as a “devotee” of his beloved. This comparison emphasizes the intensity and devotion that the speaker feels towards his beloved. Additionally, he also

compares his love to the “war” and “martyrdom” which can be interpreted as love has the power to destroy the speaker emotionally and physically.

The tone of the poem is one of longing and desire. The speaker is yearning to be recognized as a true lover by his beloved. He speaks of the “saints” and “martyrs” of love, suggesting that true love requires sacrifice and devotion. This longing is further reinforced by the use of words such as “worship,” “religion,” and “devotion.”

In conclusion, “The Canonization” is a powerful and moving poem that explores the theme of love through the use of rich imagery, structure and tone. By using the New Criticism approach, we can see that the poem expresses the speaker’s intense longing and devotion to his beloved, and his desire to be recognized as a true lover. The use of religious imagery further reinforces this idea and highlights the importance of love in the speaker’s life.

*Source:* <https://shareg.pt/2GYKPyF>

This sounds pretty good, right? You can definitely use generative AI as a starting point for criticism. But it makes mistakes, and frankly, it’s kind of conventional and boring. Read through the same essay with my highlighted annotations below. I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice New Criticism.

# Annotations: “Exploring Love and Devotion: A New Criticism Analysis of John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

“The Canonization” is a poem written by John Donne in the early 17th century. The poem explores the **theme** of love and **the speaker’s** desire to be recognized as a true lover by his beloved. Using the New Criticism approach, we can **analyze** the poem’s **form, imagery, and tone** to understand the **deeper meaning** behind the words. The title and introduction of the essay are conventional but demonstrate what I am looking for in your own work. You should include a title that describes the contents of your essay. You should also provide a brief overview and summary of the poem. This essay is missing a thesis statement. Here’s what a thesis statement might look like: The complex structure, rich imagery, and clever religious metaphors support the speaker’s plea to have his love considered worthy of sainthood.

The **form** of the poem is that of a sonnet, a traditional form often used to express love and admiration. The **rhyme scheme** is abab cdcd efef gg, which creates a sense of symmetry and balance. This **structure** reinforces the **theme** of love as something that is perfect and harmonious. The first paragraph looks at the poem’s form. However, the generative AI tool has incorrectly identified the poem’s form. “The Canonization” is not a sonnet. It comes from Donne’s 1633 posthumous collection *Songs and Sonnet*

&lt;span class='glossary\_title\_poetryplus' style='font-size: 15px;’&gt; &lt;a href='https://poemanalysis.com/poetry-plus/?utm\_source=tooltip' target='\_blank'&gt;Join Poetry&lt;span style='font-weight: bold; color: #7CB442;’&gt;+&lt;/span&gt;&lt;/a&gt; to unlock tooltip definition &lt;/span&gt;&lt;/br&gt; &lt;style&gt; @media only screen and (min-width: 1025px) {

.glossaryTooltipMoreLinkWrapper { display: none; }  
</style></div>

class=""glossarydefinition">Traditionally, sonnets are fourteen-line poems that follow a strict rhyme scheme and conform to the metrical pattern of iambic pentameter.</div>

Read more

" data-mobile-support="0" data-gt-translate-

attributes="[[{"attribute":"data-cmttooltip", "format":"html"}]]"

data-url="https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/

sonnet/">Sonnets. "The Canonization" employs a **structure of five stanzas**, each with nine **lines**. The **meter** alternates between **iambic pentameter**, **iambic trimeter**, and **iambic tetrameter**. Here are three examples:

- **iambic pentameter**: short-long, five feet Fōr Gōd's | sǎke hōld | yōŕ tōngue, | ănd lēt | mē lōve, (line 1)
- **iambic tetrameter**: short-long, four feet Ōr chīde | mŷ pāl | sŷ, ōr | mŷ gōut, (2)
- **iambic trimeter**: short long, three feet Sō yōu | will lēt | mē lōve (9)

Also, the rhyme scheme cannot be abab cdcd efef gg because each stanza is nine lines long. Let's analyze the rhyme structure of the first stanza:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love, (A)  
Or chide my palsy, or my gout, (B)  
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout (B)  
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve (A)  
Take you a course, get you a place (C)  
Observe his honor, or his grace (C)  
Or the king's real, or his stampèd face (C)  
Contemplate; what you will, approve (A)  
So you will let me love (A)



The rhyme structure for each of the five stanzas is thus **ABBACCCAA**. This is **complexity** at its finest! Why does the poem use such a **complex meter and rhyme structure**, and how does that fit into the overall religious **theme**? We could explore this question further in the essay.

The **imagery** in the poem is rich and varied, with the speaker using a variety of **metaphors** to express his feelings. He compares love to a “religion” and refers to himself as a “devotee” of his beloved. This comparison emphasizes the intensity and devotion that the speaker feels towards his beloved. Why are “religion” and “devotee” in quotes? These are not words that are used anywhere in the poem. However, the AI is correct about the poem’s central **metaphor**. A canonization is a formal religious process whereby a person becomes a saint. Donne clearly compares this process to his feelings for his beloved. You would need to **define** “canonization” to make this point in your paper. Additionally, he also compares his love to the “war” and “martyrdom” which can **be interpreted** as love has the power to destroy **the speaker** emotionally and physically. Here, the AI is missing the point entirely. There’s no comparison to a war in this poem. Martyrdom might be implied by line 28: “We can die by it, if not live by love.” You’ll want to use specific examples like this throughout your analysis. There also is no discussion of **allusions** such as the mythological allusion to a phoenix in line 23. Understanding this allusion makes the point about desire better than the AI’s overly simplistic and poorly supported discussion of war and martyrdom.

The **tone** of the poem is one of longing and desire. **The speaker** is yearning to be recognized as a true lover by his beloved. He speaks of the “saints” and “martyrs” of love, suggesting that true love requires sacrifice and devotion. This longing is further reinforced by the use of words such as “worship,” “religion,” and “devotion.” **Again, this interpretation is not really supported**

by evidence from the poem. In your own work, I'd like to see you quote entire lines. The **tone** of this poem seems more defiant than anything. Both line 1 and line 10 demonstrate the speaker's defiance and refusal to accept anyone who will deny that his love his holy.

In conclusion, "The Canonization" is a powerful and moving poem that explores the **theme** of love through the use of rich **imagery, structure and tone**. By using the New Criticism approach, we can see that **the poem expresses** the speaker's intense longing and devotion to his beloved, and his desire to be recognized as a true lover. The use of religious imagery further reinforces this idea and highlights the importance of love in the speaker's life. I think the last line here is the best. The poem does indeed use religious imagery to reinforce the sanctity of the speaker's love and highlight its importance in his life. In your own essays, you need an introduction and conclusion, but the phrase "in conclusion" feels a bit robotic here, for lack of a better term.

## You Try It!

Choose one of your favorite poems. Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that uses New Criticism to analyze the poem you chose. Then analyze the essay. Is New Criticism correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using

JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses New Criticism as a critical method and applies it to the poem you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

# 9. Student Essay

## Example: New Criticism

The following student essay example of New Criticism is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues."

### **Saving Sonny's Brother**

*by Netanya Hitchcock*

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" is a story of intergenerational trauma in which two brothers strive in very different ways to escape their parents' suffering. On the surface, the objective is to save the younger brother, Sonny, who has been incarcerated for drug abuse, but his older brother's failure to recognize jazz as the cure shows otherwise. Rejection of jazz in the story parallels fear of suffering, revealing signs of intergenerational trauma in the older brother and placing him in danger of becoming like their father. He flees suffering by avoiding any context in which it occurs—specifically, his community—but, ironically, one must face suffering in order to overcome it. In Baldwin's story, jazz is the means for doing so. As Emmanuel S. Nelson writes, jazz is "a musical form that has evolved out of the African's nightmarish experience in America" (29). Subsequently, jazz is not a cure for Sonny alone. By establishing ties with the Black community through a shared story of suffering, jazz delivers both brothers

from their fear. The older brother is able to heal from intergenerational trauma when he recognizes his community's suffering as his own through Sonny's blues.

Sonny's brother has been afraid of suffering since childhood. As a child, he would listen to his parents and grandparents tell stories of their experiences with racial prejudice. The stories frightened him, but he was more frightened by the prospect of the stories becoming his own. When the grown-ups would stop talking for the evening, he always sensed that he was moving closer to the darkness they had "come from" and "endure[d]". He realized they stopped talking "because if he [knew] too much about what...[had] happened to *them*, he'[d] know too much too soon, about what...[would] happen to *him*" (Baldwin 131). He wished they would go on talking because, for as long as they talked, the stories were only stories, and the darkness the grown-ups had come from remained within those stories. But with the silence came growing fear, and fear, bringing the darkness, made his troubles real (134). His solution, then, is to suppress all fear with denial.

He spends his adult life refusing to believe trouble when he encounters it, consistently striving to prevent his parents' stories from happening to him. The death of his daughter symbolizes his characteristic denial. Her fever seemed to be no cause for concern, so he did not call the doctor, but her death came unexpectedly (139). In a similar way, he underestimates Sonny's situation. Attributing the "menace" of hardship solely to others—to Sonny's friend, the barmaid, and the community in general (125)—he naïvely promises his mother that he will never let anything happen to Sonny. However, such a promise is impossible to keep because it denies reality. In the end, he forgets his promise anyway, even failing to "let [Sonny] know [he]'s *there*" for him (133). The consequence of his error in the case of his daughter's death serves as a harsh lesson, foreshadowing what will happen to Sonny if the brother remains willfully ignorant of suffering.

However, the brother's denial not only threatens to harm Sonny but also himself. Similar to Sonny's drugs, the brother's mindset is incompatible with healthy living. Ironically, willfully blinding himself to suffering renders him incapable of escaping it, let alone protecting Sonny, for he cannot flee what he does not see. When he learns about his uncle's murder for the first time, he cannot bear the implication that the world is just as hateful as it ever was and that Sonny could also be in danger (133). Even Sonny's drug abuse and incarceration remain unreal to him until the day when his little daughter dies, forcing him into undeniable grief and suffering for the very first time and making Sonny's troubles real (139). This experience reveals that denial prevents the brother from finding solutions to both Sonny's troubles and his own, for problems cannot be solved if they are misunderstood. Subsequently, the brother's neglect of Sonny is also the neglect of his own needs.

The brother must recognize suffering in order to survive it. In "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness and Community", Emmanuel S. Nelson observes that accepting suffering and identifying with one's community are crucial to self-discovery (27). The brother's unwillingness to listen to Sonny's music symbolizes his denial of the sufferings he shares with Sonny. Beyond this, his disapproval of jazz and his inability to know Sonny underscore his distance from the Black community, being the consequence of his fear of suffering, indicating that both Sonny and the Black community are instrumental in making suffering real for him. This separation and the compounded lack of understanding prevent the brother from knowing himself. Learning to listen to Sonny's music, then, is not only about getting to know Sonny or the community. Rather, it is about the brother accepting himself and his life with all its difficulties and sorrows.

Just as music is a medium of healing for Sonny (Baldwin 138), Sonny is a medium of healing for the brother. However,

the brother does not realize this for some time because he refuses to acknowledge that the sufferings of both Sonny and the Black community are his own. His obligation to protect Sonny blinds him to his own downfall and, while his narration consistently implies that Sonny is doomed to become like their uncle, it is far more likely that the older brother is becoming like their father or that his denial will cause him to lose Sonny, rather than save him, just as he lost his daughter. On the surface, he resembles his father simply in that his love and fear for Sonny leads him to misunderstand and seek to restrain Sonny (130). Additionally, he disapproves of jazz players and believes that the life of a musician is not good enough for Sonny (134). However, his tendency to associate jazz with bad outcomes (127) and his fear that Sonny will “die...trying not to suffer” (143) reveal a more serious similarity to their father’s story, hindering his recognition of Sonny’s ability to help him.

The image of the uncle’s “busted guitar” haunts the brother just as much as it haunted the father. Until his dying day, the father was tormented by the uncle’s murder. Because he did not trust white men (133), he feared for Sonny and tried to control him (130). Likewise, the brother fears that Sonny’s love for jazz will cause history to repeat itself and render the brother’s suffering undeniably real. Ironically, the brother’s fear that his parents’ stories will become his own—because of Sonny—directly causes suffering. Like their father, he projects his fears onto Sonny. Sonny will not die in the effort to avoid suffering as the brother fears he will—rather, that is exactly what the brother is in danger of doing. In his own words, the brother is “dying to hear [Sonny] tell [him] he [is] safe”. In the same way, their father was always searching for safety and security, “but he died before he found it” (130). The brother’s similarity to the father indicates that, rather than Sonny being in danger of becoming like their uncle, the brother is in danger of wasting his life like their father if he continues to be governed by fear.

The brother unknowingly shares similarities with Sonny as

well, which renders his confidence in his ability to help Sonny particularly ironic. His narration consistently suggests that Sonny is the one fleeing from suffering, but this conceals the brother's tendency to do the same and misrepresents Sonny's objective. Each brother harms himself to some degree through escapism. Sonny falls prey to drug abuse, and the brother practices denial. Both outlets alter reality and impede their quality of life. However, the brothers differ strongly in their ability to fix the problem. The solution lies in jazz, which Sonny plays "for his life" (138), whereas the brother is frightened by it (134). His decision to make Sonny stay in Harlem—when Sonny wanted to leave to escape drugs (144)—symbolizes his inability to know what to flee from. He assumes he has escaped because he is a school teacher—he even thinks that Sonny has escaped by eventually leaving Harlem (129)—but he fails to understand that fleeing only brings suffering closer. Sonny's view of education being useless compounds the brother's error (136). Just as algebra fails to help the brother's students (123), the brother fails to solve Sonny's problems, for he inaccurately perceives reality.

The brother's fear of history repeating itself is the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy, symbolized by his rejection of jazz, which separates him from the Black community. Just as he has always feared that his parents' stories will become his own, his rejection of jazz is tantamount to rejecting the stories of his community. Jazz is a "communal experience", as Robert P. McParland says (131)—"a means of collective intentionality" (132). By playing jazz, Sonny is telling a story, and it is a story of the suffering he shares with others. This is exactly what the brother has always feared—telling his own story. The "old folks" are no longer sitting around, talking of bygone days (Baldwin 131). Instead, Sonny, a member of his own generation, is the story-teller, and this close proximity in age, "as a bridge" (128), makes the stories of suffering to be the brother's also. In this way, whilst the brother's experience of losing his daughter



makes Sonny's suffering real (139), Sonny's suffering also makes the brother's suffering real because Sonny possesses the means to express it for both of them. Telling their stories is key to making suffering bearable.

Sonny possesses the means to heal because he recognizes that acceptance of suffering is crucial to surviving. He knows that "trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped" (127) and he knows that telling one's story and the stories of others is crucial to bearing hardship. Subsequently, he is not what his brother says he is—he is not one of the "good-time people" (134), he does not want to die (126), and he is not going to "die...trying not to suffer" (143). Sonny's mindset is best summarized by his brother's dislike of the books he used to read about India. They gave accounts of people braving bad weather and "walking barefoot through hot coals" in pursuit of wisdom. But the brother "used to say that it sounded...as though they were getting away from wisdom as fast as they could" (128). As a child, Sonny admired people who went through great difficulties to grow in strength and endurance. Whilst his older brother fostered determination to prevent suffering, Sonny began to develop the means to bear it.

Just as the brothers' suffering stems from the shared experience of their community, the cure lies in joining themselves to the community rather than separating themselves from it. Sonny's decision to do so through jazz saves him from drugs and his reclusive nature. As McParland writes, the "communal experience" of jazz is, for Sonny, a way to escape "from the isolation within the self alone" (131). Likewise, the older brother's distance from Sonny and the community reveals his own isolation, a consequence of denying his association with them through suffering. Acknowledging his suffering not only enables him to bear it but establishes a stronger tie between himself and others, enabling him to identify with others. So then, the brother discovers that grief, rather than fear, is instrumental in his relationship with Sonny

and his community. For grief creates a connection where fear builds a wall. By identifying with his community through jazz, the brother can acknowledge both Sonny's suffering and his own. Through Sonny's blues, he can finally bear the telling of his own story, and he will tell it without fear—"at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death...For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness" (Baldwin 147).

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# 10. Practicing New Criticism

Now that you've learned about New Criticism, practiced this method of analysis with "Ars Poetica," and reviewed some examples, you will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using New Criticism as your approach. You will read three different texts below. Choose one text and respond to the questions in a short essay (500-750 words). I have included questions to guide your reading. You may choose to respond to some or all of these questions; however, your response should be written as a short essay, and you will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text. Post your short essay as a response to the New Criticism Theoretical Response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

## Checklist for New Criticism

Remember, when using the New Criticism approach, the goal is to closely examine the text itself and draw interpretations from its inherent literary qualities rather than relying on external context or authorial intent. Use "the speaker" instead of "the author" when writing

about the text, and do not assume that the speaker is the author.

1. Start with a close reading of the text. If you are working with a poem, number the lines. Then look for meter, rhythm, rhyme, stanzas, etc. (or identify whether the poem is free-verse)
2. Try to identify the work's oppositions, tensions, paradoxes, and ironies (complexities in the text).
3. Look for evidence of unity in the work through specific elements including metaphor, point of view, diction, imagery, meter/rhyme, and structure.
4. Once you have identified the text's complexities and found evidence in its elements, create a thesis statement about how the poem's various elements create unity. What is the theme of the text, and how do the elements/complexities support that theme?

## 1. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot (1915)

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.  
In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.  
The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.  
And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.  
And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —  
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —  
  
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")  
Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.  
For I have known them all already, known them all:  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
  
Beneath the music from a farther room.

So how should I presume?  
And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume?  
And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)

Is it perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

And should I then presume?

And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...  
I should have been a pair of ragged claws

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in  
upon a platter,  
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.  
And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,

To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—

If one, settling a pillow by her head  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;

That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail  
along the floor—

And this, and so much more?—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a  
screen:

Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

And turning toward the window, should say:

"That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?



I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.  
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.  
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

## Questions

Here are some New Criticism questions you can use to guide your response. You do not have to use every question. You should formulate a thesis statement about the text and include this thesis statement in your response. Then support the thesis statement with evidence from the text.

1. **How does the poem's use of imagery and symbolism contribute to the overall meaning of the poem?** Explore specific instances of imagery and symbolism, such as the "yellow fog" or the "mermaids," and discuss how they enhance the poem's themes.
2. **Analyze the structure and form of the poem.** How does the irregular rhyme scheme and meter influence the reader's experience? How does Eliot's use of enjambment and punctuation affect the pacing and interpretation of the text?
3. **Examine the diction and word choice in the poem.** What impact do specific words and phrases have on the reader's understanding of Prufrock's character, his anxieties, and the sense of disillusionment conveyed in the poem?
4. **Explore the use of allusions and references.** What are

some examples of literary, historical, or cultural allusions in the poem? How do these allusions contribute to the poem's meaning?

5. **Analyze the shifts in tone and mood throughout the poem.** How do these shifts reflect the speaker's changing emotions and the complexities of his self-perception? How does tone and mood contribute to the poem's overall themes?
6. **Consider the role of time and temporality in the poem.** How does the speaker's preoccupation with time connect to the larger themes of regret, indecision, and mortality? How does the poem's structure manipulate time?

## 2. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (c. 90 CE) King James Version

And he said, A certain man had two sons:

And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this

thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

## Questions

The speaker in this text is Jesus, as reported in Luke's Gospel. This passage is Jesus's response to an accusation from the scribes and Pharisees that he "welcomes sinners" and even shares a table with them. The story seems to answer this accusation. How does knowing the context affect your reading of the parable? If you were raised and/or follow a Christian religious tradition, you may have extratextual interpretations for this parable. In your response, please try to set those aside. Remember that with New Criticism, the text itself is our focus, not the context or our outside knowledge of the text.

Here are some New Criticism questions you can use to guide your response. You do not have to use every question. You should formulate a thesis statement about the text and include this thesis statement in your response. Then support the thesis statement with evidence from the text.

1. **Examine the parable's structure and narrative sequence.**

How does the parable's storytelling structure contribute to its impact? Consider the introduction, the conflict, the climax, and the resolution. How do these elements build tension and emotion?

2. **Analyze the characters' personalities and development.**

How are the characters of the prodigal son, the father, and the older brother presented? How does their characterization contribute to the overall message of the parable?

3. **Explore the use of symbolism and metaphors.** What symbolic elements in the parable contribute to its deeper meanings? How does the idea of the prodigal son's

journey and return symbolize themes like forgiveness, repentance, and redemption?

4. **Examine the parable's language and diction.** How does a phrase like "the fatted calf" affect the tone of this parable? What other examples of archaic diction contribute to the voice? What impact do specific words and phrases have on the parable's meaning and emotional resonance?
5. **Analyze the use of repetition and rhetorical devices.** How does the repetition of certain phrases or ideas contribute to the parable's emphasis and rhythm? How do rhetorical techniques like parallelism or contrast enhance the storytelling?
6. **Discuss the use of irony in the parable.** What examples of irony can you find? How do they contribute to the text's meaning?

### 3. "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1922)

We were very tired, we were very merry—  
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.  
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—  
But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,  
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;  
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.  
We were very tired, we were very merry—  
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;  
And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,  
From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;  
And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,  
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.  
We were very tired, we were very merry,  
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,  
And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;  
And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,  
And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

## Questions

Here are some New Criticism questions you can use to guide your response. You do not have to use every question. You should formulate a thesis statement about the text and include this thesis statement in your response. Then support the thesis statement with evidence from the text.

1. **Explore the poem's title and its significance.** How does the title "Recuerdo" (Spanish for "I remember") set the tone for the poem? How does the title's choice of language relate to the theme and content of the poem?
2. **Analyze the use of imagery and diction in the poem.** What vivid images does the speaker use to describe the scene and events in the poem? How does the language style contribute to the poem's atmosphere and themes? Are there any specific words or phrases that stand out as particularly significant? How does the poem explore the idea of remembering a past experience? What emotions and reflections does the speaker's recollection evoke, and how are these emotions conveyed through the poem's language and imagery?
3. **Examine the poem's tone and mood.** How does the tone shift throughout the poem, from the playful and carefree beginning to the reflective and contemplative ending?
4. **Analyze the poem's structure and form.** How do the poem's rhyme and meter contribute to the work? Does the poem conform to a set genre (e.g., quatrain, sonnet, villanelle, etc.)? How does its use of or rejection of a

specific genre contribute to the poem's overall themes?

5. **Examine the use of punctuation.** How does Millay's use of punctuation affect the rhythm and pacing of the poem? How does it impact the reader's interpretation?
6. **Discuss the use of the second-person point of view.** How does the poem's use of "you" and "I" create a sense of intimacy and immediacy? How does this choice of point of view contribute to the poem's unity?

## Theoretical Response Assignment Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.

### Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called "Practicing [Theoretical Approach]." (For example, "Practicing New Criticism") Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.

**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you've chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is



perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*

# 11. New Criticism

## Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=280#oembed-1>*

### Slide One: New Criticism: The Business of Literature

Welcome. I'm Dr. Liza Long. In this presentation, we'll learn more about New Criticism. You'll notice that I'm using the target image again, which we'll use throughout the course. For New Criticism, the center of our target is the text. New Criticism is a formalist approach to literary analysis that looks at literature for the sake of literature, similar to a phrase you may have heard, *ars gratia artis*, or art for the sake of art. The name New Criticism comes from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book, *The New Criticism*. We will read a short excerpt from an essay Ransom wrote called "Criticism, Inc.," which outlines his belief that the study of literature should be scientific and empirical in its approach.

Whether you know the name or not, New Criticism is something that probably already feels familiar to you. This is

the type of critical approach many high school and introductory college literature courses take to analyzing texts. It starts with what we call a close reading of the text. This is a very slow, careful, word by word and line by line reading, where you are noticing a variety of elements that work together to make the text complex. With New Criticism, we are interested in analyzing literature, and that means that the text must have a certain level of complexity. It's not something you would read on a blog or social media, It's a carefully crafted text.

In our close reading, we are looking for nothing less than evidence of greatness. It is important to note here that in New Criticism, author intent does not matter at all. We don't care what the author wanted us to get out of the of the writing; what we care about is what the text itself says. In high school when you were asked to analyze a book or a play or a poem, you probably started with a close reading and looked for elements that made the text worth your time.

## **Slide Two: Close Reading: “Ars Poetica”**

Let's take a look at what a close reading actually is. The 1926 poem “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish, which you read as an example in our textbook, gives us an excellent example of how literature was developing in conversation with critical theory. This work has all the good stuff: complexity, irony, metaphor, imagery, the types of things New Critics look for when they decide that something is literature. The Ars Poetica poem is positioned in a tradition of texts that tell us how to write poetry, starting with the Latin poet Horace's Ars Poetica, a text with which MacLeish is undoubtedly familiar. “Ars poetica” means “the art of poetry.” Even in its title, the poem starts to make a statement about what poetry is.

But this poem's definition may be a bit different from how you seen poetry defined in the past. If you were going to define

poetry, how would you define it? The Oxford English dictionary tells us that poetry is a “literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm.” But MacLeish is doing something different. Instead of telling us what a poem is, he’s showing us.

I’ve posted the poem here. You’ll notice I have numbered the lines. This is something you should always do when you start a close reading of a poem. When you return to write about the poem, you’ll use line numbers in your in-text citations.

I am going to read very slowly and look at the poem line by line. (Reads poem)

What stands out to you as you listen to this text? Think about terms you’ve learned in previous literature courses, like imagery. The poem compares poetry to a globed fruit, using metaphor. But the poem is also mute. How can a poem be mute? Shouldn’t a poem say something? This is a paradox, and it also creates tension. I think there are a lot of examples of tension in the poem. What about the line, “A poem is equal to:/Not true,” for example? Tension occurs when an image creates a sense that it’s not resolved.

These are just a few examples. As you read the poem, you’re going to be looking for things like this. And remember, what I’ll be looking for in your own writing is evidence from the text to support a thesis statement that makes an argument about the text. As much as possible, try to include evidence from the text.

The three principles of New Criticism that are at work in this poem are first, that the poem should be seen as an object. In other words, author intent doesn’t matter. So this object, this text, this artifact, transcends what’s written on the page. Second, the poem is silent, it’s unchanging, it exists both inside and outside of time. And third, the poem as an unchanging object represents something that’s organized, not a meaning, but an existence. As the poem states, “A poem should not mean/ but be.”

This quote from Steven Lynn, author of *Texts and Contexts*,

really sums up the New Criticism approach: “Only the poem can tell us how to read the poem” (p. 51) Not the author, not someone else, only the poem. Your goal in New Criticism analysis is to find the unity in this complexity. The close reading is a form of scavenger hunt through the text, searching for clues to its meaning.

## Slide Three: Why and How?

So why do we do this type of analysis? Really, first and foremost, those of you who’ve done this before, know that the first statement on this slide is true: a close reading of a text can be a pleasurable experience. It can actually feel good to engage with a text at this level. We feel like we’re really connecting with ideas and with beauty as we immerse ourselves in the text. A few cautionary words: When we do this type of close reading, we do want to avoid the intentional fallacy, and also the affective fallacy. We don’t care what the author intended, and we don’t care how the poem affects you, the individual reader. We are searching for universal truths about the text.

How does “Ars Poetica” make you feel? With New Criticism, your feelings about the poem do not matter. You can still talk about tone, emotion, etc. in the text, but you’re not focusing on your own feelings. For example, when I read the line, “For all the history of grief/ An empty doorway and a maple leaf,” you might have heard my voice catch. I cry every time I read this line. It affects me personally in profound ways, in ways that it may not affect you. But in New Criticism, my personal reaction to this line does not matter. Instead, what matters is how this image functions as a metaphor for the universal human emotion of grief.

Similarly, what the author intended when he wrote the poem doesn’t matter. What matters are the words on the page and the text itself. As you read, look for evidence that comes

together to support an overarching theme. How do the parts of the poem or the short story or the novel shape the whole? As you're reading the novel assigned for this course, pay attention to the parts and how they work together. Pay attention to the speaker, the point of view. Is it first or third person? If third person, is it limited or omniscient? How does characterization contribute to the complexity of the text? Also, with New Criticism, you should evaluate the craftsmanship and artistry of the work. That's part of the reason I chose *Klara and the Sun*. There's a high level of craftsmanship and artistry in this novel.

Ultimately, though, as you engage in this type of criticism, focus on how it can be a pleasurable experience. If you're a creative writing major, think about how the approaches you are learning here can play out in your own writing. To see an example of an essay using this approach, see the AI-generated model on John Donne's poem, "The Canonization," along with my annotations on the essay. This exercise will show you how artificial intelligence can serve as a starting point, but it also showcases the limitations of tools like ChatGPT.

## Slide Four: Limitations of New Criticism

While New Criticism is certainly an important step in development of modern critical theories, there are also several limitations to this approach. First, this type of criticism assumes that the text is universal—that it has one universal meaning. For example, maybe you had to read *The Great Gatsby* in high school. I love this book. And I still remember the multiple choice test I took on it where there was one right answer to the question about what the green light at the end of the dock symbolized. If you've ever taken a multiple choice test on a poem or a book, chances are your teacher took a New Criticism approach. Remember again that the goal is to find empirical

and scientific ways to evaluate literature. That means we have to be able to find the “right” answer.

A second rather obvious limitation is something that we all know intuitively: how the text affects you, the individual reader, DOES matter! With New Criticism, because the text is all we need to understand the text, we don't take individual readers or their different experiences into account. But we never read the same text the same way twice. Think about a book you've read more than once over the course of your life. Because you are not the same person when you reread the book, your experience of reading it will inevitably be different. Or think about our responses to Natasha Tretheway's “Theories of Time and Space.” Many readers think this poem is hopeful, and you can certainly support that reading with evidence from the text. Other readers, myself included, think the poem is melancholy—that it's basically about death. That reading is also supported by the text. How you read this—or any—text will depend on your individual experiences.

Ultimately, both of these concerns reveal a flaw in this empirical, scientific approach to literature. In the homogenous literary culture that existed in the 1920s-1950s, the same people were writing literature, reading literature, teaching literature, and evaluating literature. In Western societies, those people happened to be white men. This does not mean that ANY of the literature produced during this period isn't amazing. It is! I love T.S. Eliot and Archibald MacLeish. But you can see how it's much easier to find universal meaning when you're in a closed circle of people who all were educated in the same way, read the same types of books, and are now teaching others the things they learned. When we talk about exploding the canon, this is what we mean. By allowing new voices to enter these literary spaces, it's no longer quite so easy to find a universal meaning in every text. These limitations ultimately led to the development of several other critical theories we will learn about in this course.

## Slide Five: Terms to Use

This slide has a list of terms you should incorporate as you practice New Criticism. I expect to see these in your theoretical response. Some of these terms will feel familiar, and some might be new. I think you're familiar with voice, speaker, tone, point of view. Using speaker or narrator instead of the author's name might be new to you though. It's a hallmark of this type of criticism. Instead of talking about what the author intended, we talk about how the text functions.

Imagery and figures of speech will be important to comment on, including metaphor. Diction includes things like alliteration or onomatopoeia as well as rhyme, both internal and final. For opposition, look for opposites in the text and how they work. Ambiguity is an uncertain or unclear part of the text that may be open to multiple interpretations. Paradox is something that seems impossible: Again, how can a poem be mute? All these complexities, these oppositions, tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes are going to lead to unity. That's the overarching theme of the work. We're first looking for complexity—literature shouldn't be easy, right? Then we're considering how those complexities in the text create unity.

## Slide Six: New Criticism Checklist

As you prepare to complete your own New Criticism analysis, here's a checklist for you to help you. What complexities can you find in the work? That's the first thing you need to look for. What idea unifies the work? How are those tensions and ambiguities resolved? It's super important to use details or images from the text to support your responses to this question. Finally, how do the parts of the work support that whole?



As you look at this checklist, your next step is to think about the poem you've decided to work with for your first essay. You'll find these poems posted in Blackboard. Don't do all three poems, just choose one, and then ask yourself the questions on this checklist. Those are the next steps to start applying criticism to the poem that you've chosen. On our final slide, I'll give you a chance to brainstorm some ideas.

You also need to complete your theoretical response. Your initial response is due on Thursday, and your follow up post is due on Sunday. Follow the instructions for the theoretical response. I want you to practice writing a mini essay with a thesis statement that makes an argument about the text and is supported by evidence.

## **Slide Seven: Essay One Close Reading Activity**

For this activity, use the poem you have decided to work with for your first essay. Answer these questions, then start to think about how you can formulate a thesis. Remember that summary is not analysis. You should not tell me what the poem says or what the symbols and imagery are. Instead, you'll make an argument about how these elements function in the poem to support its meaning. Reach out if you have questions or need help.

# 12. Feedback

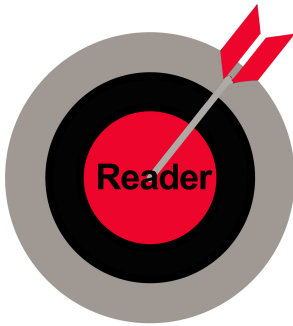
I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cw.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=291>*

## SECTION III

# READER: READER RESPONSE THEORY

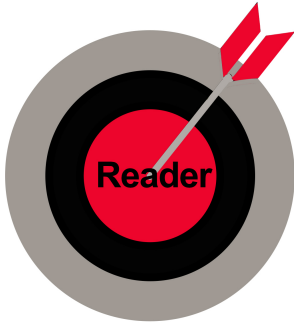


*Reader Response Theory explores the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text, asserting that meaning is not solely inherent in the work but is actively constructed by the reader's subjective interpretation and personal experiences. In the following chapters, you will*

*learn more about this type of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*



# 13. What Is Reader Response?



Reader response theory may be understood as a reaction to the strict formalism of New Criticism. You'll recall that we discussed some of New Criticism's limitations in our previous section, including the problem of finding "one right answer" to literary questions. Also, there's the obvious objection that what

the reader, either actual or implied, brings to a text *does* matter to how the text can be understood.

Reader response criticism is a literary theory that focuses on the individual reader's experience and interpretation of a text. It asserts that the meaning of a text is not fixed and objective but rather subjective and dependent on the reader's interpretation and response to it.

According to this theory, readers bring their own experiences, values, and beliefs to the text, which shape their understanding and response to it. This means that each reader's interpretation of a text is unique and can vary depending on factors such as their cultural background, personal experiences, and emotional state. We call this **subjective reader response**.

Reader response theory originated in the 1960s and 1970s as a reaction to the dominant New Criticism approach, which focused on the text itself rather than the reader's response to it. Proponents of reader response theory argue that by emphasizing the role of the reader in shaping meaning, this

approach offers a more democratic and inclusive view of literature.

Reader response theory can be applied to any genre of literature, from poetry to novels to plays. It is often used in conjunction with other approaches to literary analysis, such as feminist or psychological criticism, to explore the ways in which a text can be interpreted and experienced by different readers. When we consider how the **implied reader** might read a text, we are thinking about reader responses that might be different from our own. Steven Lynn notes in *Texts and Contexts*: “For people who rejoice in the diversity of experiences and responses and opinions, reader-response criticism will be especially interesting, not only because of our different orientations and abilities, but also because of the different ways that we partition and perceive our experiences” (p. 86).

Prominent practitioners of reader response criticism include Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser.

## Learning Objectives

1. Become familiar with a variety of approaches to texts, in the form of literary theories (CLO 1.1)
2. Use a variety of approaches to texts to support interpretations (CLO 1.2)
3. Understand how formal elements in literary texts create meaning within the context of culture and literary discourse. (CLO 2.1)

4. Understand how context impacts the reading of a text, and how different contexts can bring about different readings (CLO 4.3)
5. Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing how textual interpretation can change given the context from which one reads (CLO 6.2)
6. Discuss the significance and impact of multiple perspectives on a given text (CLO 7.3)

## An Excerpt from Reader Response Scholarship

Read the following excerpt from Louise Rosenblatt's 1978 book, *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. before proceeding with this chapter. (The entire book can be read at the Internet Archive)

Critics and literary theorists, who have traditionally lavished attention on authors and texts, have only recently begun to consider the reader. A few have reacted to the point of insisting on the predominance of the reader's personality. Others focus on the reader's response—but to the literary work of art still assumed to exist “out there” in the text. What, in fact does the reader respond to? What does he interpret? Such questions lead me in the following pages to discriminate between the reader's activities in “efferent” and in “aesthetic reading.”

This cardinal distinction generates new light on the multidimensional process of evoking a poem and on the dynamic “mode of existence” of the literary work of art. Analysis of both the openness, and the constraint offered by the text clarifies its complex role in the transaction with the reader. The theoretical foundation is thus laid for dealing with such persistent and controversial problems as validity in interpretation, criteria of evaluation, and the relation between literary criticism and other disciplines....

As early as 1938, I wrote: “There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work.... The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader....”

The transactional approach is listed the challenges and has incorporated the sustenance brought by the intervening years. During World War II, for example, when I found myself associate chief of the Western European Section of the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence (OWI), the problem of eliciting meaning from texts took the form of propaganda analysis and the derivation of economic, social, and political information from the Nazi-dominated media. As a result, I became keenly aware of the differences between “intuitive reading” and such techniques as content analysis; this contrast had repercussions in my later thinking about critical method and critical theory....Ironically, since I was not caught in the pendulum swing disillusionment with the New Critics, the transactional theory expounded



here repudiates recent efforts to make the reader all important.... (Rosenblatt ix-xiii)

The long history of the theory of literature, from Plato to the present, records certain well-known shifts of emphasis. In surveying these changes, I find it helpful to visualize a little scene: on a darkened stage I see the figures of the author and the reader, with the book—the text of the poem or play or novel—between them. The spotlight focusses on one of them so brightly that the others fade into practical invisibility. Throughout the centuries, it has become apparent, usually either the book or the author has received major illumination. The reader has tended to remain in shadow, taken for granted, to all intents and purposes invisible. Like Ralph Ellison's hero, the reader might say, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." Here or there a theoretician may start to take him seriously, and the spotlight may seem from time to time to hover over him, but actually he has never for long held the center of attention....

As we survey the field of literary theory, then, the reader is often mentioned, but is not given the center of the stage. The reason is simple; the reader is usually cast as a passive recipient, whether for good or ill, of the impact of the work. He is still, in a sense, invisible, even when he is treated as a member of something referred to under such collective rubrics as "the audience" or "the reading public." Thus readers are viewed mainly en masse, as in studies of Shakespeare's audience or accounts of the emergence of the middle-class reading public in the eighteenth

century, or analysis of categories of fiction, and their respective types of readers in the twentieth century. The individual reader has seldom been acknowledged as carrying on his own special and peculiar activities. There is a great difference between the concept of the reader as a passive “audience” and the kind of visibility that I claim for the reader.

Within the past few years, the spotlight has started to move in the direction of the reader. Sometimes the reaction has been more against the socio-political implications of the New Criticism than against its aesthetic theory. Sometimes the rehabilitation of the reader takes the form of a rather extreme subjectivism or Freudianism. Thus, some preoccupied with the author’s text, have seen the reader as a *tabula rasa*, receiving the imprint of “the poem.” Others, in reaction, see the text is empty, awaiting the content brought by the reader. Rejecting both of these extremes, the discussion that follows begins with readers encountering a text and proceeds to meet the basic questions that flow from this event. The purpose will be to admit into the limelight the whole scene—author, text, and reader. We shall be especially concerned with the member of the cast his hitherto been neglected—the reader. (Rosenblatt 1-5).

## **Subjective Reader Response: A Tool to Use with Many Types of Analysis**

Subjective reader response puts you—the reader—in the

spotlight. This critical approach emphasizes the role of the reader in creating meaning, arguing that meaning is not inherent in the text but is rather constructed by the reader through their own experiences, beliefs, and emotions. In subjective reader response, the reader's personal interpretation and reaction to a text is just as important as the author's intention or the formal qualities of the text itself. Subjective reader response is a process of engaging with a literary text in a personal and individual way, allowing your own experiences, emotions, and beliefs to shape your interpretation of the text.

To engage in subjective reader response, you can follow these steps:

1. **Read the text:** Begin by reading the text closely, paying attention to the language, structure, and themes. This should feel familiar from your experiences with New Criticism.
2. **Reflect on your own experiences:** Think about how your own experiences and emotions relate to the themes and characters in the text. Consider how the text makes you feel and what thoughts or memories it evokes.
3. **Respond to the text:** Write down your thoughts and reactions to the text, either in a journal or as annotations in the margins of the text itself. Consider how your interpretation differs from or aligns with traditional interpretations of the text.
4. **Consider how your response might differ from others' responses.** Share your responses with others and engage in discussion and debate about the different interpretations and perspectives that the text can generate.
5. **Reflect on the process:** Reflect on how your personal experiences and emotions influenced your interpretation of the text and consider how this approach differs from other approaches to literary analysis.

Overall, subjective reader response is a highly personal and subjective approach to literary analysis that emphasizes the importance of individual experience and perspective in the process of interpreting and analyzing literature. We will continue to use this tool as we interact with texts throughout the semester. From now on, as you read a text, consider your own response to that text. What role do you as a reader play in the creation of the text's meaning?

## Receptive Reader Response: The Implied Reader

The **implied reader** is a term used in reader response criticism to refer to the hypothetical reader that a literary text addresses and assumes. This implied reader is not an actual person, but rather a constructed persona created by the text itself. The implied reader is the reader that the text expects and anticipates, and this reader is shaped by the text's style, tone, language, and themes. The implied reader is not necessarily the same as the actual reader who reads the text, but instead represents the ideal reader who will respond to the text in the way that the author intended. The concept of the implied reader emphasizes the importance of the reader in the process of literary interpretation and analysis, and it highlights the ways in which texts shape and influence the expectations and responses of their readers.

When practicing receptive reader response, the reader tries to put aside their preconceptions and expectations and to enter into a state of empathetic engagement with the text. The receptive reader is attuned to the language, tone, and style of the text and tries to understand the text on its own terms, rather than imposing their own perspective or interpretation onto it. Receptive reader response emphasizes the importance

of the reader's emotional and affective response to the text, as well as their cognitive and intellectual engagement. This approach to reading acknowledges the complexity and diversity of responses that a single text can generate and emphasizes the importance of individual subjectivity and interpretation in the process of literary analysis.

Some forms of receptive response to texts consider the responses of individual demographic groups. For example, see Catherine Broadwell's poem "Dear Phantom Children" in "Practicing Reader Response." How might Millennials read this poem differently than Boomers or Generation Z? Would women read this poem differently from men? What about a religious person compared with a nonreligious person? Each of these are examples of specific receptive readers. A scholar might consider how a particular group would respond to the text and also examine whether that group's response would be different from the text's implied reader response.

## **Applying Subjective and Receptive Reader Response Techniques to Literature**

As Louise Rosenblatt noted above, putting the spotlight on the reader does not necessarily mean that anything goes in terms of our approach to texts. As with New Criticism, we still need evidence from the text to support our argument, but with subjective reader response, we will also use evidence from how the text affects us to consider its meaning. With receptive reader response, we'll keep our own reactions in mind, but we will also consider ways that our personal reading of the text might differ from the text's expected reader. This requires you to come up with some sort of implied reader. For whom was this text written? What would that person expect or anticipate from the text? Start with a close reading of the text, just like we

practiced in our previous section. But this time, in addition to looking at the poem's formal elements, pay attention to your reaction to the text.

*What an Indian Thought When He Saw a Comet*

By Tso-le-oh-woh

Flaming wonderer! that dost leave vaunting, proud  
Ambition boasting its lightning fringed  
Immensity—cleaving wings, gaudy dipp'd  
In sunset's blossoming splendors bright and  
Tinsel fire, with puny flight fluttering  
Far behind! Thou that art cloth'd in mistery  
More startling and more glorious than thine own  
Encircling fires—profound as the oceans  
Of shoreless space through which now thou flyest!  
Art thou some erring world now deep engulf'd  
In hellish, Judgement fires, with phrenzied ire  
And fury hot, like some dread sky rocket  
Of Eternity, flaming, vast, plunging  
Thro' immensity, scatt'ring in thy track  
The wrathful fires of thine own damnation  
Or wingest thou with direful speed, the ear  
Of some flaming god of far off systems  
Within these skies unheard of and unknown?  
Ye Gods! How proud the thought to mount this orb  
Of fire—boom thro' the breathless oceans vast  
Of big immensity—quickly leaving  
Far behind all that for long ages gone  
Dull, gray headed dames have prated of—  
Travel far off mystic eternities—

Then proudly, on this little twisting ball  
Returning once more set foot, glowing with  
The splendors of a vast intelligence—  
Frizzling little, puny humanity  
Into icy horrors—bursting the big  
Wide-spread eyeball of dismay—to recount  
Direful regions travers'd and wonders seen!  
Why I'd be as great a man as Fremont  
Who cross'd the Rocky Mountains, didn't freeze  
And's got a gold mine!

*Cherokee poet Tso-Le-Oh-Woh, also spelled Tsoo-le-oh-wah published this poem in The Cherokee Advocate shortly after the Klinkerfues comet passed through the skies in 1853. We know little of his life beyond this poem.*

Here are some questions to consider as you analyze the poem using subjective reader response:

1. How does the poem's vivid and imaginative language impact your emotional response to the comet described in the poem? Do the descriptions evoke feelings of awe, wonder, or fear? How does your emotional response influence your interpretation of the poem's themes?
2. The poem seems to explore the idea of perspective and the contrast between the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of humanity. How does the speaker's perspective on the comet change throughout the poem? How does your own perspective as a reader affect your understanding of the poem's message about the relationship between humanity and the cosmos?
3. The poem mentions the concept of "vast intelligence" and

the idea of experiencing “wonders seen.” How do these notions of intelligence and wonder connect with your personal beliefs or experiences? Do they resonate with your own sense of curiosity and exploration, or do they challenge your perspective in any way?

4. The poem references historical figures like Fremont and alludes to exploration and discovery. How do these references to real-world events and individuals influence your interpretation of the poem’s themes? Do they make the poem more relatable or provide a historical context for the speaker’s thoughts?
5. The poem combines elements of both admiration and potential dread regarding the comet’s significance. How does this duality in the speaker’s attitude toward the comet resonate with your own complex emotions when encountering the unknown or the extraordinary? How does your personal background and cultural context shape your response to the poem’s portrayal of this celestial event?

Note: Make sure to support your analysis with specific textual evidence from the poem to support your response. Use line numbers to refer to specific parts of the text.

After completing your subjective reader response, you’ll want to come up with a thesis statement that you can support with the evidence you’ve found.

**Example of subjective reader response thesis statement:** Reading “What an Indian Thought When He Saw a Comet” by Tso-le-oh-woh, I feel connected to our nation’s past through a common



experience of celestial wonder as I recall how the 2017 total solar eclipse influenced me. This common experience of wonder can serve to unite us in our humanity.

With receptive reader response, we will want to think about the audience for this poem when it was published in 1853. Would they have expected a poem like this from a Native American poet? How would the audience have thought about the comet of 1853? Consider how two different audiences—Cherokee Nation members and American settlers of European descent—might read this poem in different ways. Do both audiences have the same expected response to the poem?

Here are some receptive reader response questions to consider:

1. How might the poem have been received by Indigenous communities or individuals who were familiar with the cultural and spiritual significance of celestial events in their own traditions? How would their prior beliefs and experiences have influenced their reading of the poem?
2. Considering the historical context of the poem's publication (late 19th or early 20th century), how might readers from various backgrounds have perceived the poem's references to exploration and figures like Fremont? Would readers with an interest in or firsthand experience of westward expansion and frontier exploration have a different perspective on these references?
3. Given the poem's references to intelligence and wonders seen, how might readers from diverse intellectual and

educational backgrounds of that era have responded to the poem? Would scholars, scientists, and those with a more formal education have engaged with it differently than individuals with limited access to formal education?

4. How might religious communities and clergy members from the time period have interpreted the poem's references to religious imagery and the potential connection between the comet and divine forces? Would different religious denominations have varying interpretations or responses to the poem?
5. Considering the historical and sociopolitical context of the poem's era, how might readers who were influenced by ideas of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny have perceived the poem's exploration themes? Would they have viewed it as a celebration of American exploration and expansion or as a critique of these ideas?

**Example of receptive reader response thesis**

**statement:** In the poem "What an Indian Thought When He Saw a Comet" by Tso-le-oh-woh, the celestial event serves as a prism through which Indigenous communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would have interpreted themes of cosmic interconnectedness, the clash of cultural worldviews, and the implications of encountering the unknown, offering insights into their unique perspectives rooted in spiritual beliefs and historical experiences.

## Limitations of Reader Response Criticism

The most obvious criticism leveled at reader response criticism is its complete opposition to the goals of New Criticism. If we center the reader, does this mean that *any* interpretation of a text is a correct one? Literary scholars such as Rosenblatt and Iser strive to overcome this criticism by emphasizing that rigor is still required in analyzing texts. We don't completely abandon the tools of New Criticism when we do reader response. Instead, we augment these interpretations by understanding that a text's meaning is shared, a joint creation of both the author and the reader.

In some cases, the reader's interpretation may overshadow other aspects of a literary work, such as its formal qualities, language, structure, and historical significance. This may result in a narrow analysis that neglects important aspects of the text. When you do your own reader response, start with a close reading, and continue to notice the formal elements that support your reading. It's also important to identify and consider the role of personal bias when approaching a text.

In general, while reader response theory offers valuable insights into the role of the reader in interpreting literature, its subjectivity and emphasis on individual responses can limit its applicability and objectivity in certain analytical contexts. Researchers and critics often combine reader response insights with other critical approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of literary texts. We tend to see more receptive than subjective reader response publications from scholars.

## Reader Response Scholars

These are some influential practitioners of reader response theory.

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## Further Reading

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# 14. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Model Essay

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

## Model AI Essay: Subjective Reader Response Criticism

"Subjective Journeys through John Donne's 'The Canonization': Personal

## Interpretations and Emotional Engagements”

John Donne’s “The Canonization” is a complex and challenging poem that rewards close reading and careful analysis from a Reader Response perspective. In this essay, I will explore some of the ways in which this poem can be understood and appreciated through the lens of Reader Response theory.

One of the key themes of “The Canonization” is the relationship between love and religion. The poem begins by addressing an unspecified audience (“For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love”), suggesting a tension between the speaker’s desire for romantic love and the demands of religious orthodoxy. As the poem unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the speaker sees no inherent conflict between these two aspects of human experience. In fact, the speaker argues that his love for his beloved is a form of religious devotion: “We can die by it, if not live by love.” Through this paradoxical claim, the speaker suggests that love can be a source of transcendence and spiritual fulfillment, even as it remains rooted in earthly desires and pleasures.

Another important aspect of “The Canonization” is the use of imagery and symbolism to convey the speaker’s complex and nuanced perspective on love. For example, the speaker compares himself and his beloved to a pair of alchemists, seeking to transform

base materials into gold. This metaphor highlights the transformative power of love, as well as the often-elusive nature of its rewards. Similarly, the repeated image of the lovers as “saints” and “martyrs” emphasizes the religious dimension of their relationship and suggests that their love is a form of self-sacrifice and devotion.

At the same time, however, the poem is notable for its playful and ironic tone, which undercuts any attempt to take the speaker’s claims at face value. For example, the repeated refrain “For God’s sake hold your tongue” can be read as both a plea for silence and an ironic commentary on the speaker’s own verbosity. Similarly, the poem’s final lines, in which the speaker claims that “our love may be called appetite/ No canonized saint, no martyr made”, can be read as a rejection of conventional notions of love and religion, or as a subversion of those very concepts.

Overall, the Reader Response approach to “The Canonization” emphasizes the active and dynamic nature of the reading process, as readers engage with the poem on their own terms and interpret its meaning in light of their own experiences and perspectives. By attending to the poem’s use of imagery, symbolism, and tone, as well as its themes of love, religion, and self-expression, readers can appreciate the rich complexity and ambiguity of Donne’s poetic vision. Whether one sees the poem as a celebration of love and faith, a critique of conventional morality, or a combination of both, “The Canonization” remains a powerful and enduring work of literature that rewards multiple readings and interpretations.



Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/e867e903-3838-4b77-ae90-01b6b15899b9>

As you can see, with subjective reader response, ChatGPT really struggles. I have to give the AI a clear role, perhaps by creating a “character” for it. Though you can definitely use generative AI as a starting point, with subjective reader response, it might take you almost as much time to “create” your AI author as it would just to write the essay yourself.

I decided to push ChatGPT to write a more truly subjective reader response by crafting a role/character for it. Here is my prompt: “You are a nineteen year old male college student. Your parents do not like your girlfriend and they want you to break up with her because they think that you’re too good for her. But you adore your girlfriend and want to be with her forever. You think the love that you two share is truly special and extraordinary. Your girlfriend is brilliant, witty, and talented. She has long black hair and is one of the most beautiful people you have ever met. You have been asked to write a short subjective reader response essay to John Donne’s poem “The Canonization” using your own experiences with love and romance to help you understand and analyze the poem. Please write this essay and include some comparisons to your personal experiences with your girlfriend. Make an argument based on the poem that parents should not interfere with their children’s romantic relationships.”

## Model AI Essay: Subjective Reader

## Response with Detailed Role in Prompt

### The Priceless Jewel of Love: Defending Personal Romantic Choices Through John Donne's "The Canonization"

As a college student navigating the complexities of love and relationships, I find myself in a situation where my parents have strong reservations about my girlfriend. They believe that I deserve better, but I am deeply in love with her and cherish our unique bond. John Donne's poem "The Canonization" resonates with me as it explores the profound and extraordinary nature of love. Through my own experiences and the lens of this poem, I argue that parents should not interfere with their children's romantic relationships, as love is a deeply personal and precious journey that transcends conventional judgments.

"The Canonization" by John Donne delves into the idea that love is an elevated and spiritual experience that deserves reverence and celebration. Donne's portrayal of love as a transformative force reminds me of the extraordinary connection I share with my girlfriend. Just like the lovers in the poem, our love has

the power to transcend societal norms and expectations. Donne's assertion that love is both sacred and joyful resonates with the joy I find in my relationship, making me believe that such love should be honored, not questioned.

Donne's poem also explores the theme of opposition and challenges faced by lovers. He argues that external forces should not stand in the way of love's celebration and canonization. In my own situation, the opposition comes from my parents, who believe they know what is best for me. However, I contend that they may not fully understand the depth of my love and connection with my girlfriend, just as the critics in the poem fail to grasp the true essence of the lovers' devotion.

The poem's imagery of a "precious jewel" captures the essence of love as something rare and invaluable. In my own life, my girlfriend's brilliance, wit, and talent make her a treasure beyond measure. She is not only beautiful but also an incredible person, and our love is a precious jewel that I hold dear. Donne's poem reminds me that love is not something to be easily dismissed or sacrificed based on external judgments.

In conclusion, John Donne's "The Canonization" speaks to the depth and significance of love, emphasizing that it should be celebrated and cherished rather than undermined by external forces. My personal experiences with love and my deep affection for my girlfriend lead me to believe that parents should trust their children's judgment when it comes to romantic relationships. Love is a unique and extraordinary journey, and it is the individuals involved who best understand its worth and significance. Just

as the lovers in the poem found their love to be truly special, I too believe that my girlfriend and I share a love that is worth celebrating and defending against outside interference.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/e867e903-3838-4b77-ae90-01b6b15899b9>

I decided to work with this second role-specific version for my annotations. I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice subjective reader response.

## Annotations: “The Priceless Jewel of Love: Defending Personal Romantic Choices Through John Donne’s “The Canonization”

As a college student navigating the complexities of love and relationships, I find myself in a situation where my parents have strong reservations about my girlfriend. They believe that I deserve better, but I am deeply in love with her and cherish our unique bond. **John Donne’s poem “The Canonization” resonates with me** as it explores the profound and extraordinary nature of love. Through my own **experiences** and the lens of this poem, I argue that parents should not interfere with their children’s romantic relationships, as love is a deeply personal and precious journey that transcends conventional judgments. **Even though I gave the AI a role, this introduction still feels perfunctory and impersonal to me. However, you’ll note the differences between this version and the first one. At least this essay is attempting subjective reader response criticism, where the first one was just tossing out terms. The thesis statement needs some revision though. Here’s a better**

one: For a reader who is passionately devoted to my life partner, "The Canonization" is proof that parents should not interfere with their children's romantic relationships, as love is a deeply personal and precious journey that transcends conventional judgments.

"The Canonization" by John Donne delves into the idea that love is an elevated and spiritual experience that deserves reverence and celebration. Donne's portrayal of love as a transformative force reminds me of the extraordinary connection I share with my girlfriend. Just like the lovers in the poem, our love has the power to transcend societal norms and expectations. Donne's assertion that love is both sacred and joyful **resonates** with the joy I find in my relationship, making me believe that such love should be honored, not questioned.

One major problem with the essay so far is that it is not including specific references to the poem with line numbers. A good passage to quote here would be lines 10-15:

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?

What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?

Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?

When did my colds a forward spring remove?

When did the heats which my veins fill

Add one more to the plaguy bill?

Donne's poem also explores the theme of opposition and challenges faced by lovers. He argues that external forces should not stand in the way of love's celebration and canonization. **In my own situation**, the opposition comes from my parents, who believe they know what is best for me. However, I contend that they may not fully understand the depth of my love and connection with my girlfriend, just as the critics in the poem fail to grasp the true essence of the lovers' devotion. The comparison between the parents and the poem's unnamed critics is a good one. However, again, give some specific examples of the connection like these lines

"So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.

We die and rise the same, and prove

Mysterious by this love." (24-26)

The poem's imagery of a "precious jewel" captures the essence of love as something rare and invaluable. In **my own life**, my girlfriend's brilliance, wit, and talent make her a treasure beyond measure. She is not only beautiful but also an incredible person, and our love is a precious jewel that I hold dear. Donne's poem reminds me that love is not something to be easily dismissed or sacrificed based on external judgments.

Um, what? There are a lot of images in this poem, but "precious jewel" is not one of them. More apt (and correct) images include tapers, eagles, doves, phoenixes, and of course, the poem's overarching metaphor comparing the lovers to saints. This is an example of the AI "hallucinating" (or making things up), and unfortunately, it's a central point of this essay, even making it into the title.

In conclusion, John Donne's "The Canonization" speaks to the depth and significance of love, emphasizing that it should be celebrated and cherished rather than undermined by external forces. **My personal experiences** with love and my deep affection for my girlfriend lead me to believe that parents should trust their children's judgment when it comes to romantic relationships. Love is a unique and extraordinary journey, and it is the individuals involved who best understand its worth and significance. Just as the lovers in the poem found their love to be truly special, I too believe that my girlfriend and I share a love that is worth celebrating and defending against outside interference. The last line here is good for the type of subjective reader response I asked the AI to write. Other terms to use in this type of criticism include **affect/effect** (both how the poem affects you and the effect that the words produce). The goal with subjective reader response is to respond authentically to the text. with rich, personal details. To get that

level of detail, you would have to spend a lot more than the five minutes I spent building your AI writer's role.

I also asked the AI to write a receptive reader response essay using the implied reader. Here's what it came up with:

## Model AI Essay: Receptive Reader Response

### "The Canonization of Love: Challenging Norms and Celebrating Complexity in John Donne's Poem"

In John Donne's poem "The Canonization," the implied reader is someone who appreciates and understands the complexities and paradoxes of love. This implied reader seeks a deeper exploration of the multifaceted nature of romantic relationships and the idea that love transcends societal norms and judgments. The poem effectively meets the implied reader's expectations by delving into the spiritual and transformative aspects of love, celebrating the extraordinary connection between two lovers, and challenging conventional perspectives on love.

The implied reader of "The Canonization" is someone who embraces the idea that love can be both sacred and joyous. The poem captures this sentiment by

presenting love as a powerful force that elevates and enriches the lives of the lovers. The poem meets the implied reader's expectations by highlighting the idea that love is not merely a conventional or societal construct but a profound, all-encompassing experience that defies easy categorization.

Furthermore, the poem challenges the implied reader to question societal norms and judgments surrounding love. It emphasizes that love should not be subject to external opposition or criticism, which aligns with the implied reader's desire for a deeper exploration of love's complexities. The poem challenges the implied reader to reevaluate preconceived notions about love and relationships.

In conclusion, John Donne's "The Canonization" effectively meets the expectations of an implied reader who seeks a profound exploration of love, its transformative power, and its ability to transcend societal norms. The poem challenges conventional perspectives and encourages the implied reader to recognize the spiritual and extraordinary nature of love. Overall, the poem celebrates the depth and complexity of love, making a compelling argument that love should be revered and not subject to external judgments.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/e867e903-3838-4b77-ae90-01b6b15899b9>

I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice receptive reader response.



## Annotations: “The Canonization of Love: Challenging Norms and Celebrating Complexity in John Donne’s Poem”

In John Donne’s poem “The Canonization,” the **implied reader** is someone who appreciates and understands the complexities and paradoxes of love. This implied reader seeks a deeper exploration of the multifaceted nature of romantic relationships and the idea that love transcends societal norms and judgments. The poem effectively meets the implied reader’s **expectations** by delving into the spiritual and transformative aspects of love, celebrating the extraordinary connection between two lovers, and challenging conventional perspectives on love. This response does a good job of defining the implied reader for the poem in the introduction. In your essay, you would be defining the implied reader, then looking for examples from the text to support how your definition of that reader is supported. Of the three essays, this is the first one that has come up with an actual thesis statement that makes an argument. I highlighted it in blue. The analysis/argument is clear from the use of the word “effectively.”

The implied reader of “The Canonization” is someone who embraces the idea that love can be both sacred and joyous. The poem captures this sentiment by presenting love as a powerful force that elevates and enriches the lives of the lovers. The poem meets the implied reader’s **expectations** by highlighting the idea that love is not merely a conventional or societal construct but a profound, all-encompassing experience that defies easy categorization. You would want to provide specific examples from the poem to support this point.

Furthermore, the poem challenges the implied reader to question societal norms and judgments surrounding love. It emphasizes that love should not be subject to external opposition or criticism, which aligns with the implied reader’s

desire for a deeper exploration of love's complexities. The poem challenges the implied reader to reevaluate preconceived notions about love and relationships. Again, you would want to provide specific examples like the ones noted above. Look for evidence from the poem to support your points. It would also be interesting to note anything that might be surprising or unexpected to the implied reader, or to consider that in this case, the implied reader might be an ACTUAL person—Ann Donne's father. Donne married Ann when he was 29 and she was 17. Here's more biographical information to support that point:

Haskin, Dayton. "A History of Donne's 'Canonization' from Izaak Walton to Cleanth Brooks." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 92, no. 1, 1993, pp. 17–36. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27710762>. Accessed 6 Sept. 2023.

In conclusion, John Donne's "The Canonization" effectively meets the expectations of an implied reader who seeks a profound exploration of love, its transformative power, and its ability to transcend societal norms. The poem challenges conventional perspectives and encourages the implied reader to recognize the spiritual and extraordinary nature of love. Overall, the poem celebrates the depth and complexity of love, making a compelling argument that love should be revered and not subject to external judgments. This essay would provide a good "bare bones" framework for a receptive reader response poem, but you would need to flesh it out significantly by adding specific details from the poem itself, and in this case, considering the historical circumstances in which the poem was written. Sometime we actually know who the poem's audience was, and this is important to talk about.

## You Try It!

Choose one of your favorite poems. Then either define an implied reader for your poem, or create the profile of a subjective reader (you can use your own subjective details or create a character). Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that applies the type of reader response theory approach you chose to the text. Then analyze the essay. Is the theory correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses this psychological theory and the text you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

# 15. Student Essay

## Example: Reader Response

The following student essay example of Receptive Reader Response is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s short story, "The Drone King."

## **"The Bees without a King"**

*By Ethan McCall*

When reading Kurt Vonnegut's short story "The Drone King," most readers would come away from the story with the idea that Sheldon Quick is just a crazy businessman who invested in the wrong idea. I mean, what sane person would think that inventing carrier bees in a world with the wireless telegraph is a good idea? That's just the thing though. No sane person would think that it's a sound business idea. However, this story by Kurt Vonnegut likely speaks differently to a particular audience. This story's implied readers are a specific demographic of men who call themselves Incels. While it at first appears to be a story that reflects with and represents the ideologies of Incels, it eventually reveals itself to be a critique of their worldview and ideologies.

Now, before I go any further, I must first shed some light on what an Incel is and the community that they belong to. Incel is a term that means "involuntarily celibate." This online community of Incels is comprised of men who are bitter about their lack of sexual experience, and they blame women for it. The men belonging to this group also blame women and feminism for the "downfall" of society. They believe that women have dominated the world and now unfairly discriminate against men, thus robbing them of the social dominance in society that they believe men should have (Glance 288-289).

The character of Sheldon Quick in Vonnegut's story is eerily

similar to these men who call themselves Incels. Sheldon Quick is a man who has enjoyed a significant level of success and wealth throughout his life. One would think that given his circumstances, he has almost everything that he could ever want. However, from his first appearance, his biases become clear. When the stockbroker enters the Millennium Club to meet Mr. Quick, he is stopped at the front desk and informed that there are no women allowed into the club (Vonnegut). As a reader, this immediately sets off alarm bells in my head and paints an unflattering picture of Sheldon Quick. The Millennium Club and its patrons very clearly have some very negative views on women if they won't even allow them to enter the building. However, someone from the Incel community would very likely agree with and praise this rule for how it puts women back into their place.

Rather than women dominating men and taking over their spaces as Incels believe women have been doing for quite some time now, they aren't even allowed in the same spaces as men anymore. This lack of proximity lets men be themselves and innovate as they are supposed to without being disturbed by the lesser sex. To Incels, women have no inherent value aside from being able to have sex with men. This mindset can be seen in Glace's article on Incels. When women have expressed that men who only want sex are disgusting, Incels have responded callously: "[W]hat the fuck else is there to want from such a vapid shell of a person? Your only redeeming quality is that you can lay still and take a dick. Why are you surprised?" (Glace, *Taking the Black Pill* 294-295). However, these roles are swapped within the world of the bees. The male bees are exterminated once they fulfill their only function of mating with the queen (Vonnegut). The reason that Mr. Quick, and by extension the Incel, are so interested in the plight of the male bee is because they are being discriminated against in the same way that Incels discriminate against women.

This is another sentiment that Incels latch onto and agree

with. They believe that men are the wrongfully oppressed gender, and women have stolen their rightful place in society (Glance 288-289). This idea that men are being oppressed by women is further expanded upon when Mr. Quick takes the stockbroker up to the roof where his bees are being kept. When they arrive on the roof, they come across the scene of large bees stumbling out of their hives being hunted and killed by smaller bees. As Mr. Quick saved the large bees, the stockbroker asked him what was happening. Mr. Quick replies that it's a bee war between the large males and the smaller female bees. When the stockbroker asks which bees the hives belonged to originally, Mr. Quick says that "Your question is good enough to be chiseled in granite for all time to ponder" (Vonnegut). From this scene, it becomes very clear how Mr. Quick feels about the plight of the male bees, and by extension, the human males of our world.

Mr. Quick believes that males have constructed society as we know it. They've worked tirelessly to construct the foundation of the world. However, now women have come in and pushed the men out of their positions of power, thereby taking the world for themselves. An Incel reader reading this would most likely be agreeing with Mr. Quick and his views on the world. This way of thinking about the role of women is very much in line with how Incels think about women. They have unrightfully taken the roles of leadership that men used to have, and are now discriminating against them, exactly how the male bees from the hives that they built are being pushed out from their homes and being torn to pieces by the female bees.

Much like Incels, Mr. Quick has determined that men are under attack from women, and drastic measures need to be taken in order to save the male species from this unrightful persecution. Due to this unfair exclusion of male bees from their hives, Mr. Quick is determined to save them, because much like the human male, Mr. Quick believes that male bees will be safe from female tyranny if they are kept away from

women. He does this by creating a new hive for them that consists only of other male bees that have been forced out of their hives. In their new hives, they aren't forced to do anything or be productive. According to Mr. Quick, the reason that the male bees can enjoy their lives in such leisure is that they are free from the demanding and thankless females (Vonnegut). This is very similar to the Millennium Club to which Mr. Quick belongs due to the fact that in both the new hive and the Millennium Club, no women are allowed. Mr. Quick's observations about bees have poisoned his views on women.

From this point on, a reader from the Incel community would likely expect that Mr. Quick would continue to fight against the female rule that the world has come to be subjected to. However, subverting these expectations of the reader, the story starts to slowly show that Mr. Quick's philosophy is incorrect. When Mr. Quick tells the stockbroker that they will only have to provide each of their bees with a penny's worth of honey for an entire year, the stockbroker asks a very astute question: why don't the male bees make their honey? This is when Mr. Quick reveals that it's only the female workers that make honey. The stockbroker then points out the obvious. "Huh. I guess that's why the female workers knock off the males, eh? The males are nothing but a drain on the community" (Vonnegut). This is a key moment in the story that shows just how biased Mr. Quick is. Even though he knows that these male workers contribute nothing and instead are only a burden on the colony, he still believes that the female bees clearing them out of the hive is unjust.

This echoes back to his situation. He was left a large sum of money by his father and has spent his life doing anything but work. Mr. Quick sees himself in the male bees. They're both useless and provide nothing to their respective societies, yet Mr. Quick thinks that they both deserve a respected spot in the societies that they've contributed nothing to. A reader from the Incel community would likely be affected negatively



by this development in the story. While the story was at first reiterating and reaffirming Incel ideology, all of a sudden, it's pointing out flaws in their beliefs.

The ideals of Mr. Quick, and by extension the Incel, continue to be challenged, and ultimately proven wrong, at the press conference that he holds to demonstrate how bees can live in a male-only hive. According to a study by Nicolae-Sorin Drăgan on political narratives, telling a story means to lie or speak falsely. This story is a distortion of an otherwise uncomfortable reality and lying (70). This sort of story is exactly what Mr. Quick tells to the press during his conference. He goes on about how the only crime that male bees have committed is that they can't make honey, yet they are discriminated against and killed for it. He declares that this system needs to be stopped for the safety of bees, but it's obvious at this point that Mr. Quick is also talking about human women as well as bees.

However, despite his grandiose speech to the press, when Mr. Quick releases the bees so that they can go to their all-male colony, they don't. Instead, they go back to the colonies that are run by the female bees and are subsequently killed. It's at this point in the story that it subverts the expectations of the Incel reader about where the story was going. They were most likely expecting the story to praise Mr. Quick as a hero who was liberating men from the tyranny of females, but rather, the story shows Mr. Quick as a bitter old man who can't accept his shortcomings and instead blames all of his problems on women and society as a whole. Thus, condemning Incels and their hatred of women, showing them that their lack of importance in society is their fault rather than a malicious plot by women to overthrow men.

While this story first appeared to agree with and support Incel beliefs, painting Mr. Quick to be a wise old man who has realized that women are the problem with society, as the story progresses, it shows that Mr. Quick is a lot of things, but wise isn't one of them. Instead, he's a man who was frightened by

the social power of women increasing. Seeing this as a threat to men everywhere, Mr. Quick, in his attempt to prove that women were unnecessary, proved only that the ideals he and many Incels believe in are undeniably flawed and fundamentally wrong. This story uses the sympathy that Incel readers initially had for Mr. Quick as a way to challenge their beliefs. By the end of the story, when the character they supported so much is proven to be nothing but a sad man whose judgment was clouded by hate, Incel readers are encouraged to look inward and examine the beliefs that led Mr. Quick to this point and think about where their beliefs will take them. The story uses the downfall of Mr. Quick to inspire a change from the hateful ideology of Incels to something kinder and more tolerant.

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# 16. Practicing Reader Response Criticism

Now that you've learned about reader response theory, practiced this method of analysis with "What an Indian Thought When He Saw a Comet," and reviewed some examples, you will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using reader response as your approach. You will read three different texts below. Choose one text and respond to the questions in a short essay (500-750 words).

I have included questions to guide your reading. You may choose to respond to some or all of these questions; however, your response should be written as a short essay, and you will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text. Post your short essay as a response to the Reader Response Theoretical Response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

## Checklist for Practicing Reader Response Criticism

When using the reader response approach, the goal is to put the reader, either subjective (you) or implied, at the center of the target. You'll interpret the text

based on either your own subjective responses or based on the implied reader's responses. You may be asked to consider how different people would respond differently to the text.

1. Practice active reading. Make notes, ask questions, respond to the text, and record your responses.
2. Focus on the details (much as you do with a close reading) and ask how your response to the text might change if those details changed.
3. Decide whether you will write a subjective or a receptive response to the text.

## 1. Dear Phantom Children (2018)

*By Catherine Broadwell (formerly Catherine Kyle)*

Dear phantom children  
who hover near the futon frame  
like lavender genies or wisps  
of feathered incense smoke, take heed—  
we get it. You enjoy the look  
of daffodils and jello. It might be fun  
to dress you as a puppy or a cub. We've pushed  
our share of strollers watching neighbor ladies'  
babies, and yes, the dappling of sun on plaid  
and board book can be sweet. The thing is,  
spirits, we can barely even hold each other—  
our other hands latched to the railing of this speeding ship.

\*

To those already here, well, welcome  
to holey vessel. We'll do our best  
to patch it up before it's sink or  
kill. We're trying not to polar bear  
ourselves or leave you ice cubes  
from which you'll have to hop and  
hop, precarious wayfare. Democracy,  
the ultimate hair-tearing-out group project.  
Humanity, the raft that everybody wants  
to steer. For now, don't worry, babies; look—  
aurora borealis. Take a load off, babies; look  
at Ursa Major rise.

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**Catherine Broadwall** (formerly known as Catherine Kyle) is the author of *Water Spell* (Cornerstone Press, forthcoming 2025), *Fulgurite* (Cornerstone Press, 2023), *Shelter in Place* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2019), and other collections. Her writing has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She was the winner of the 2019-2020 COG Poetry Award and a finalist for the 2021 Mississippi Review Prize in poetry. She is an assistant professor at DigiPen Institute of Technology, where she teaches creative writing and literature. "Dear Phantom Children" is All Rights Reserved, reprinted here with written permission of the author.

## Questions

Here are some reader response questions you can use to guide your response. You do not have to use every question. You should formulate a thesis statement about the text and include this thesis statement in your response. Then support the thesis statement with evidence from the text.

1. **Who is the implied reader for this passage?** What characteristics of the writing help you to define this implied reader? How does the author use description to relate to the implied reader?
2. **How does the poem's imagery affect you?** Consider these lines: "We'll do our best/to patch it up before it's sink/or kill" and "Democracy,/The ultimate hair-tearing-out group project." What specific examples from recent events come to mind when you read these lines?
3. **How do you feel after reading the poem?** Do you feel wistful? Hopeful? Angry? Resigned? Something else? Would other readers be likely to feel like you do when they read the poem? Why or why not?
4. **What role do you think social media played in the writing of this poem?** Does the imagery remind you of Instagram posts? Why might some readers see the influence of social media in the poem while others might not? In what ways would those readers be different?
5. **Think of at least five different receptive audiences for this text.** Examples might include Millennials, Boomers, Generation Z, parents, people who have chosen to be childless, women, men, liberals, or conservatives. How might these different groups understand the text in different ways?

## 2. Excerpt from *Demon Copperhead* (2022 Pulitzer Prize Co-Winner for Fiction)

*By Barbara Kingsolver*

First, I got myself born. A decent crowd was on hand to watch, and they've always given me that much: the worst of the job was up to me, my mother being let's just say out of it.

On any other day they'd have seen her outside on the deck of

her trailer home, good neighbors taking notice, pestering the tit of trouble as they will. All through the dog-breath air of late summer and fall, cast an eye up the mountain and there she'd be, little bleach-blonde smoking her Pall Malls, hanging on that railing like she's captain of her ship up there and now might be the hour it's going down. This is an eighteen-year-old girl we're discussing, all on her own and as pregnant as it gets. The day she failed to show, it fell to Nance Peggot to go bang on the door, barge inside, and find her passed out on the bathroom floor with her junk all over the place and me already coming out. A slick fish-colored hostage picking up grit from the vinyl tile, worming and shoving around because I'm still inside the sack that babies float in, pre-real-life.

Mr. Peggot was outside idling his truck, headed for evening service, probably thinking about how much of his life he'd spent waiting on women. His wife would have told him the Jesusing could hold on a minute, first she needed to go see if the little pregnant gal had got herself liquored up again. Mrs. Peggot being a lady that doesn't beat around the bushes and if need be, will tell Christ Jesus to sit tight and keep his pretty hair on. She came back out yelling for him to call 911 because a poor child is in the bathroom trying to punch himself out of a bag.

Like a little blue prizefighter. Those are the words she'd use later on, being not at all shy to discuss the worst day of my mom's life. And if that's how I came across to the first people that laid eyes on me, I'll take it. To me that says I had a fighting chance. Long odds, yes I know. If a mother is lying in her own piss and pill bottles while they're slapping the kid she's shunted out, telling him to look alive: likely the bastard is doomed. Kid born to the junkie is a junkie. He'll grow up to be everything you don't want to know, the rotten teeth and dead-zone eyes, the nuisance of locking up your tools in the garage so they don't walk off, the rent-by-the-week motel squatting well back from the scenic highway. This kid, if he wanted a shot at the finer

things, should have got himself delivered to some rich or smart or Christian, nonusing type of mother. Anybody will tell you the born of this world are marked from the get-out, win or lose.

Me though, I was a born sucker for the superhero rescue. Did that line of work even exist, in our trailer-home universe? Had they all quit Smallville and gone looking for bigger action? Save or be saved, these are questions. You want to think it's not over till the last page.

It was a Wednesday this all happened, which supposedly is the bad one. Full of woe etc. Add to that, coming out still inside the fetus ziplock. But. According to Mrs. Peggot there is one good piece of luck that comes with the baggie birth: it's this promise from God that you'll never drown. Specifically. You could still OD, or get pinned to the wheel and charbroiled in your driver's seat, or for that matter blow your own brains out, but the one place where you will not suck your last breath is underwater. Thank you, Jesus.

I don't know if this is at all related, but I always had a thing for the ocean. Usually kids will get fixated on naming every make and model of dinosaur or what have you. With me it was whales and sharks. Even now I probably think more than the normal about water, floating in it, just the color blue itself and how for the fish, that blue is the whole deal. Air and noise and people and our all-important hectic nonsense, a minor irritant if even that.

I've not seen the real thing, just pictures, and this hypnotizing screen saver of waves rearing up and spilling over on a library computer. So what do I know about ocean, still yet to stand on its sandy beard and look it in the eye? Still waiting to meet the one big thing I know is not going to swallow me alive.

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**Barbara Kingsolver** (born April 8, 1955) is a Pulitzer Prize winning American novelist, essayist and poet. Her widely



known works include *The Poisonwood Bible*, the tale of a missionary family in the Congo, and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a non-fiction account of her family's attempts to eat locally. In 2023, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for the novel *Demon Copperhead*.<sup>[1]</sup> Her work often focuses on topics such as social justice, biodiversity and the interaction between humans and their communities and environments. This passage excerpted from *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. Copyright © 2022 by Barbara Kingsolver and reprinted under a Fair Use Exception.

## Questions

Here are some reader response questions you can use to guide your response. You do not have to use every question. You should formulate a thesis statement about the text and include this thesis statement in your response. Then support the thesis statement with evidence from the text.

1. **Who is the implied reader for this passage?** What characteristics of the writing help you to define this implied reader? How does knowing that the author won a Pulitzer Prize for the book in 2022 affect your reading and your understanding of the implied reader?
2. **Are you aware that *Demon Copperhead* is a loose retelling of the classic Charles Dickens novel *David Copperfield*?** How would reading Dickens's novel or at least being aware of this fact impact a reader's response to the book?
3. **What do you expect will happen to the narrator based on this passage?** Will the book's ending be happy? Sad? Mixed? Why do you feel this way?
4. **Describe your view of the narrator.** Do you relate to him, or does he seem like a stranger? Why do you feel this

way? Look at specific examples from the text.

5. **Think of at least five different receptive audiences for this text.** Examples might include doctors, college students, people living in recovery, or people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. How might these different groups understand the text in different ways?

### 3. Idea 61: Since There's No Help (1619)

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part.  
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;  
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,  
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.  
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,  
And when we meet at any time again,  
Be it not seen in either of our brows  
That we one jot of former love retain.  
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,  
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies;  
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,  
And Innocence is closing up his eyes—  
Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,  
From death to life thou might'st him yet recover!

## Questions

Here are some reader response questions you can use to guide your response. You do not have to use every question. You should formulate a thesis statement about the text and include this thesis statement in your response. Then support the thesis statement with evidence from the text.

1. **How do you emotionally respond to the speaker's decision to part ways with their beloved?** What emotions or sentiments does the poem evoke in you as a reader, and how do they influence your understanding of the speaker's perspective?
2. **Reflect on your own experiences with love and parting.** Can you relate to the emotions conveyed in the poem, such as the sense of finality and the desire to cleanly break free? How do your personal experiences shape your interpretation of the speaker's actions and feelings?
3. **Consider the poem's portrayal of the end of a romantic relationship as a moment of "latest breath" and "closing up [of] eyes."** How does this imagery resonate with your own perceptions of love and its eventual conclusion? How does it enhance or challenge your understanding of love's stages and transitions?
4. **Explore the concept of closure in the poem.** How does the speaker seek closure in this parting, and what does it mean to them? How does the notion of canceling vows and erasing all signs of love from their brows reflect the speaker's perspective on moving on from a relationship?
5. **Who is the implied reader for the poem?** Is there an actual audience that we know of? Consider this information about the author, Michael Drayton. In 1591, he fell in love with Anne Goodere and probably wrote this sonnet shortly afterwards. Anne married Sir Henry Rainsford in 1596. While Drayton never married, he often visited Anne and Henry at their country home, and his passion apparently transmuted into a deep friendship with Anne. How does this information affect your response to the poem?

# Theoretical Response Assignment

## Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.

## Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called "Practicing [Theoretical Approach]." (For example, "Practicing New Criticism") Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.

**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you've chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this

assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*

# 17. Reader Response

## Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=359#oembed-1>*

### Slide One: Reader Response Criticism

Welcome. I'm Dr. Liza Long, and in this presentation, we're going to learn about reader response theory. I'm expecting that you are already at least a little familiar with reader response, whether you've heard it called that or not. This is a type of literary analysis that you have likely engaged in throughout high school and perhaps even in your other English courses.

But now we'll formalize our study of reader response as a critical theory, learning more about methods and history of this critical approach to texts. You'll notice that unsurprisingly, the reader is at the center of the analysis when we do reader response. We're actually going to look at two types of reader response and two type of readers: a subjective reader response (that's all about you and your interactions with the text), and a receptive reader response, where we consider the implied

reader, a hypothetical reader who doesn't actually exist but for whom the text seems to have been written.

Why focus on the reader? I love this quote from reader response theorist Louise Rosenblatt. She said, "I find it helpful to visualize a little scene: on a darkened stage I see the figures of the author and the reader, with the book—the text of the poem or play or novel—between them. The spotlight focusses on one of them so brightly that the others fade into practical invisibility. Throughout the centuries, it has become apparent, usually either the book or the author has received major illumination. The reader has tended to remain in shadow, taken for granted, to all intents and purposes invisible. Like Ralph Ellison's hero, the reader might say, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." Here or there a theoretician may start to take him seriously, and the spotlight may seem from time to time to hover over him, but actually he has never for long held the center of attention."

When doing subjective reader response, some questions you could ask might be, how am I responding to this idea or language? What does this make me think? What am I expecting next? As we read our assigned novel for this class, you're probably already doing this in your reading responses. In those assignments, I'm explicitly asking you to respond to the text in this subjective, personal way.

Receptive reader response is more common in literary scholarship. With this approach, we're asking ourselves to consider how a typical or implied reader might respond to the text. Again, this reader is a hypothetical construct, just as, if you think about it, the implied author is also a hypothetical construct. Remember that we learned how the New Critics abandoned author intent because, among other reasons, it's not actually possible to know what the author intended, even if the author is around to tell us. This is an especially interesting point in light of a concept called paratext, or text that is written about a text. We will learn more about this, with J.K. Rowling

and YA author John Green as examples, when we watch Lindsey Ellis's video "Death of the Author."

It's probably already abundantly clear how this type of criticism is different from New Criticism. In fact, it's in many respects a strong reaction to the sterile and clinical approach that New Critics took to literature, placing the text at the center of the target. Now, with reader response criticism, instead, we're going to look at how the text affects the reader: either you in subjective criticism, or the implied reader in receptive criticism. As part of our receptive approach, we will also consider how readers from different demographic groups might respond to texts in different ways.

## Slide Two: Subjective Reader Response

Just as we took the tool of close reading from New Criticism, we will take subjective reader responses to texts from reader response theory. Going forward, for every text we read, you should engage in a brief reader response exercise. Here are some guidelines for how to do this:

1. **Read the text:** Begin by reading the text closely, paying attention to the language, structure, and themes. This should feel familiar from your experiences with New Criticism.
2. **Reflect on your own experiences:** Think about how your own experiences and emotions relate to the themes and characters in the text. Consider how the text makes you feel and what thoughts or memories it evokes.
3. **Respond to the text:** Write down your thoughts and reactions to the text, either in a journal or as annotations in the margins of the text itself. Consider how your interpretation differs from or aligns with traditional interpretations of the text.



4. **Consider how your response might differ from others' responses.** Share your responses with others and engage in discussion and debate about the different interpretations and perspectives that the text can generate.
5. **Reflect on the process:** Reflect on how your personal experiences and emotions influenced your interpretation of the text and consider how this approach differs from other approaches to literary analysis.

Let's take a look at the poem "What an Indian Thought He Saw When He Saw a Comet" by Tso-le-oh-who, a Cherokee author whose poem was published in the Cherokee Advocate in 1853. We don't know much else about the poem's author, but we can conclude that he had literary talent if we look at the complexities throughout the poem. Don't get too hung up on the poem's creative spelling. English spelling was not standardized at this point in time. When we're doing subjective reader response, it's inevitable that we will all have different reactions to the poem. As I read the poem, think about your responses.

(Reads "What an Indian Thought He Saw When He Saw a Comet")

For me, the first thing I think of is a book I read last summer called *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown. This book sought to tell American history from the Native Indigenous perspective, and it really opened my eyes to some of the injustices that Americans perpetrated on Native Americans, including the Trail of Tears, where Cherokee nation members from 1830 to 1850 were forced from their homelands, with many dying along the way. That this poem was written shortly after the worst of that forced relocation was a detail I personally noticed because I had recently read about this historical period. The reference to the explorer John C. Fremont, who came West and found gold, felt especially harsh in light

of this historical event. I read the description of the comet as a “sky rocket of eternity” as potentially exacting judgment and retribution on behalf of the Native Americans.

But another thought that comes to me is the clear sense of awe and wonder at a heavenly sight this poem captures so brilliantly. In this, I can connect empathetically with the author and the text. I thought of my own experiences in 2017 when I witnessed the total eclipse of the sun from Ontario, Oregon. It was one of the most magical and mysterious moments of my life. These lines really brought this to mind for me: “Thou that art cloth’d in mistery/ More startling and more glorious than thine own/Encircling fires—profound as the oceans/Of shoreless space.”

And the idea of riding the comet, though impossible, felt exhilarating to me. In crafting a subjective reader response thesis statement, I decide to focus on that second response: “Reading “What an Indian Thought When He Saw a Comet” by Tso-le-oh-woh, I feel connected to our nation’s past through a common experience of celestial wonder as I recall how the 2017 total solar eclipse influenced me. This common experience of wonder can serve to unite us in our humanity.”.

This is what I’m going to be looking for when you write your theoretical response. You’re going to do a subjective reading of the text you choose, then use the questions below the text to create a thesis statement. Then you will support that thesis statement with evidence from the text.

You can engage in a sort of counterargument with this type of criticism as well by considering how other people might interpret the evidence that you use and then explain as you would with a counter argument, why your way is a more correct or a more appropriate reading. As my annotations to the AI draft essays show you, I want to see very specific, concrete examples from the text itself. Focus on the language and how it works to make the reader feel something. What

does the reader expect? What does the reader anticipate? Use the checklist and the questions to guide your response.

## **Slide Three: Terms to Use in Reader Response**

Here are some terms to use in reader response. I've also bolded some terms that work well in this type of criticism in my annotation to the AI models.

Affect/effect in both senses of these words can be useful to consider. How does the text affect you or the implied reader? Expectation and anticipation are also important concepts for this type of criticism. How does the text meet or not meet your expectations? What do you anticipate will happen and why?

Here's a simple checklist to follow, starting with your subjective reading of the text you choose to use for your theoretical response. I recommend that you read all three texts, then choose the one that resonates most with you personally.

1. Practice active reading. Make notes, ask questions, respond to the text, and record your responses.
2. Focus on the details (much as you do with a close reading) and ask how your response to the text might change if those details changed.
3. Decide whether you will write a subjective or a receptive response to the text.

You might write in the third person if you're doing receptive reader response, but subjective should always use the first-person pronoun "I." I think this will probably be relatively easy, especially compared with New Criticism, but remember that you should still consider formal elements. Also, with this type of criticism, if you have actual information about the actual intended reader, this is worth noting in your response. You may

choose either subjective or receptive when you are completing this assignment this week, so have fun with it. As always, if you have questions, feel free to reach out to me. I'm really looking forward to seeing how you interact with the text and how you apply reader response criticism.

# 18. Feedback

I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)

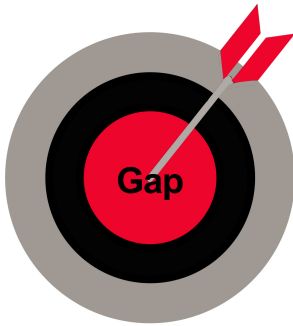


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## SECTION IV

# GAP: DECONSTRUCTION (POST-STRUCTURALISM)



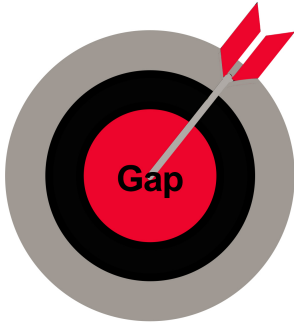
*Deconstruction, rooted in post-structuralism, challenges traditional notions of stable meaning by examining how language inherently contains contradictions and opposing forces, dismantling binary oppositions and highlighting the instability of interpretations within a*

*text. In the following chapters, you will learn more about this type of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*





# 19. What Is Deconstruction?



Deconstruction is a critical approach to literary analysis and philosophy that was developed in the late 1960s, most notably by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It challenges the traditional notions of language, meaning, and truth by exposing the contradictions and inconsistencies within

texts and ideas.

At its core, deconstruction argues that all texts and ideas are composed of a series of oppositions or binary pairs, such as good/evil, presence/absence, or male/female. These binary pairs are often assumed to be stable and objective, but deconstruction asserts that they are actually unstable and subjective, and that true shared meaning is an impossible goal. This is why I have placed “the gap” at the center of our target.

Deconstruction involves closely analyzing a text or idea to reveal these underlying binary pairs and the ways in which they are unstable and contradictory. It seeks to undermine the notion that language can provide objective meaning or truth by exposing the ways in which language undercuts its own meaning, privileges certain meanings, and contains hierarchies of meaning.

According to deconstruction, there is no definitive interpretation of a text or idea, but rather multiple possible meanings that are always in flux. Deconstruction also

emphasizes the role of the reader or interpreter in shaping the meaning of a text, arguing that the reader's own biases and assumptions play a crucial role in the way a text is understood.

Deconstruction has been widely influential in literary and cultural studies, as well as in philosophy, and has been used to analyze a wide range of texts and ideas. It has also been the subject of much debate and criticism, with some arguing that it is overly skeptical or nihilistic in its approach to meaning and truth.

## Learning Outcomes

- Consider a wide range of alternatives to a habitual way of approaching texts. (CLO 1)
- Understand how formal elements in literary texts create meaning within the context of culture and literary discourse (CLO 2.1)
- Apply knowledge of formal elements of literature and vocabulary in analysis and discussion of literature (CLO 2.3)
- Understand how to perform close readings of texts (CLO 4.2)
- Be exposed to the diversity of human experience, thought, politics, and conditions through the application of critical theory (CLO 6.4)
- Understand that interpretation is inherently political, and that it reveals assumptions and

expectations about value, truth, and the human experience (CLO 7.1)

## **A Note about Structuralism (and Post-Structuralism)**

While we will not use structuralism in this class, it's important to be aware of its existence because deconstruction, also called post-structuralism, is a response to structuralism. Structuralism is a theoretical approach that emerged in the social sciences and humanities in the mid-20th century. It views phenomena as systems of interrelated parts or elements, and emphasizes the underlying structures and patterns that shape those phenomena.

In literature, for example, a structuralist analysis might focus on the underlying rules or patterns that govern the construction of a narrative or a character's development. In linguistics, structuralists study the grammar and syntax of languages to identify the underlying rules that govern their structure.

Structuralism is often associated with the work of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who applied its principles to the study of cultures and societies. According to Lévi-Strauss, cultures are structured like languages, with underlying systems of symbols and meanings that shape the way individuals think, communicate, and behave.

One of the key principles of structuralism is the idea that meaning is not inherent in individual elements, but rather emerges from the relationships and patterns that exist between them. Structuralists also emphasize the importance

of context and the ways in which different elements are interdependent and cannot be understood in isolation.

While structuralism has been influential in a variety of fields, it has also been criticized for its tendency to prioritize abstract systems over individual experiences and for its potential to oversimplify complex phenomena.

Structuralism isn't really used in literary criticism anymore, though it continues to be used in linguistics and anthropology. Post-structuralism/deconstruction are more popular critical methods for literary scholars, so we will focus our time in this section on deconstruction. However, if you are interested in learning more, you can read Claude Levi-Strauss's essay, "The Structural Study of Myth," to see how this theory functions in relation to texts. We will not practice applying structuralism to a text; instead, we will work with application using deconstruction as our critical method.

## An Excerpt from Deconstruction Scholarship

Hold on tight! As we learned in the introduction, deconstruction is about exposing the gaps in meaning. In the excerpt from a chapter below, Jaques Derrida tries to explain his concept of *différance*. Before you attempt to read Derrida, I recommend watching this video from philosophy professor Ellie Anderson.



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## From “Différance” by Jacques Derrida (1982) (translated by Alan Bass)

I will speak, therefore, of a letter.

Of the first letter, if the alphabet, and most of the speculations which have ventured into it, are to be believed.

I will speak, therefore, of the letter *a*, this initial letter which it apparently has been necessary to insinuate, here and there, into the writing of the word *difference*; and to do so in the course of a writing on writing, and also of a writing within writing whose different trajectories thereby find themselves, at certain very determined points, intersecting with a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly. One can always, *de facto* or *de jure*, erase or reduce this lapse in spelling, and find it (according to situations to be analyzed each time, although amounting to the same), grave or unseemly, that is, to follow the most ingenuous hypothesis, amusing. Thus, even if one seeks to pass over such an infraction in silence, the interest that one takes in it can be recognized and situated in advance as prescribed by the mute irony, the inaudible misplacement, of this literal permutation. One can always act as if it made no difference. And I must state here and now that today's discourse will be less a justification of, and even less an apology for, this silent lapse in spelling, than a kind of insistent intensification of its play.

On the other hand, I will have to be excused if I refer, at least implicitly, to some of the texts I have ventured to publish. This is precisely because I would like to attempt, to a certain extent, and even though in principle and

in the last analysis this is impossible, and impossible for essential reasons, to reassemble in a sheaf the different directions in which I have been able to utilize what I would call provisionally the word or concept of *différance*, or rather to let it impose itself upon me in its neographism, although as we shall see, *différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept. And I insist upon the word sheaf for two reasons. On the one hand, I will not be concerned, as I might have been, with describing a history and narrating its stages, text by text, context by context, demonstrating the economy that each time imposed this graphic disorder; rather, I will be concerned with the general system of this economy. On the other hand, the word sheaf seems to mark more appropriately that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning—or of force—to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others.

Therefore, preliminarily, let me recall that this discreet graphic intervention, which neither primarily nor simply aims to shock the reader or the grammarian, came to be formulated in the course of a written investigation of a question about writing. Now it happens, I would say in effect, that this graphic difference (a instead of e), this marked difference between two apparently vocal notations, between two vowels, remains purely graphic: it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard. It cannot be apprehended in speech, and we will see why it also bypasses the order of apprehension in general. It is offered by a mute mark, by a tacit monument, I would even say by a pyramid, thinking not only of the form of the letter when it is printed. as a capital, but also of the text in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* in which the body of

the sign is compared to the Egyptian Pyramid. The *a* of *différance*, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: *oikesis*. And thereby let us anticipate the delineation of a site, the familial residence and tomb of the proper<sup>1</sup> in which is produced, by *différance*, the economy of death. This stone (provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription) is not far from announcing the death of the tyrant.<sup>2</sup>

And it is a tomb that cannot even be made to resonate. In effect, I cannot let you know through my discourse, through the speech being addressed at this moment to the French Society of Philosophy, what difference I am talking about when I talk about it. I can speak of this graphic difference only through a very indirect discourse on writing, and on the condition that I specify, each time, whether I am referring to difference with an *e* or *différance* with an *a*. Which will not simplify things today, and will give us all, you and me, a great deal of trouble, if, at least, we wish to understand each other. In any event, the oral specifications that I will provide (when I say “with an *e*” or “with an *a*”) will refer uncircumventably to a written text that keeps watch over my discourse, to a text that I am holding in front of me, that I will read, and toward which I necessarily will attempt to direct your hands and your eyes. We will be able neither to do without the passage through a written text, nor to avoid the order of the disorder produced within it—and this, first of all, is what counts for me.

The pyramidal silence of the graphic difference between the *e* and the *a* can function, of course, only within the system of *ptionetic* writing, and within the language and grammar which is as historically linked to phonetic writing as it is to the entire culture inseparable from phonetic writing. But I would say that this in itself

(the silence that functions within only a so-called phonetic writing) quite opportunely conveys or reminds us that, contrary to a very widespread prejudice, there is no phonetic writing. There is no purely and rigorously phonetic writing. So-called phonetic writing, by all rights and in principle, and not only due to an empirical or technical insufficiency, can function only by admitting into its system nonphonetic “signs” (punctuation, spacing, etc.). And an examination of the structure and necessity of these nonphonetic signs quickly reveals that they can barely tolerate the concept of the sign itself. Better, the play of difference, which, as Saussure reminded us, is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play. Inaudible is the difference between two phonemes which alone permits them to be and to operate as such. The inaudible opens up the apprehension of two present phonemes such as they present themselves. If there is no purely phonetic writing, it is that there is no purely phonetic phone. The difference which establishes phonemes and lets them be heard remains in and of itself inaudible, in every sense of the word.

It will be objected, for the same reasons, that graphic difference itself vanishes into the night, can never be sensed as a full term, but rather extends an invisible relationship, the mark of an inapparent relationship between two spectacles. Doubtless. But, from this point of view, that the difference marked in the “differ( )nce” between the e and the a eludes both vision and hearing perhaps happily suggests that here we must be permitted to refer to an order which no longer belongs to sensibility. But neither can it belong to intelligibility, to the ideality which is not fortuitously affiliated with the objectivity of theorein or understanding.<sup>3</sup> Here, therefore, we must let ourselves refer to an order that



resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible. The order which resists this opposition, and resists it because it transports it, is announced in a movement of *différance* (with an a) between two differences or two letters, a *différance* which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space that will keep us together here for an hour, between speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two.

What am I to do in order to speak of the a of *différance*? It goes without saying that it cannot be exposed. One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become present, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present<sup>4</sup> in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present. Now if *différance* (and I also cross out the ) what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself-as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or in a hole with indeterminable borders (for example, in a topology of castration).<sup>5</sup> In every exposition it would be exposed to disappearing as disappearance. It would risk appearing: disappearing.

So much so that the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate that

différance is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of différance which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. Such a development is not in question here, and this will be confirmed progressively. Différance is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological—ontotheological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.

For the same reason there is nowhere to begin to trace the sheaf or the graphics of différance. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. The problematic of writing is opened by putting into question the value *arkhe*.<sup>6</sup>

Also, by decision and as a rule of the game, if you will, turning these propositions back on themselves, we will be introduced to the thought of différance by the theme of strategy or the stratagem. By means of this solely strategic justification, I wish to underline that the efficacy of the thematic of différance may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded, lending itself not

only to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed. Whereby, once again, it is not theological.

I would say, first off, that *différance*, which is neither a word nor a concept, strategically seemed to me the most proper one to think, if not to master (thought, here, being that which is maintained in a certain necessary relationship with the structural limits of mastery) what is most irreducible about our “era.” Therefore I am starting, strategically, from the place and the time in which “we” are, even though in the last analysis my opening is not justifiable, since it is only on the basis of *différance* and its “history” that we can allegedly know who and where “we” are, and what the limits of an “era” might be.

Even though *différance* is neither a word nor a concept, let us nevertheless attempt a simple and approximate semantic analysis that will take us to within sight of what is at stake.

We know that the verb *differer* (Latin verb *differre*) has two meanings which seem quite distinct;<sup>7</sup> for example in *Littre* they are the object of two separate articles. In this sense the Latin *differre* is not simply a translation of the Greek *diapherein*, and this will not be without consequences for us, linking our discourse to a particular language, and to a language that passes as less philosophical, less originally philosophical than the other. For the distribution of meaning in the Greek *diapherein* does not comport one of the two motifs of the Latin *differre*, to wit, the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representaton—concepts that I would summarize here in a word I have never used but that

could be inscribed in this chain: temporization. Differer in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment nor fulfillment of “desire” or “will,” and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect. And we will see, later how this temporization is also temporalization and the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time, the “originary constitution” of time and space, as metaphysics or transcendental phenomenology would say, to use the language that here is criticized and displaced.

The other sense of differer is the more common and identifiable one: to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc. When dealing with differen(ts)(ds), a word that can be written with a final ts or a final ds, as you will, whether it is a question of dissimilar otherness or of allergic and polemical otherness, an interval, a distance, spacing, must be produced between the elements other, and be produced with a certain perseverance in repetition.<sup>8</sup>

Now the word *difference* (with an e) can never refer either to differer as temporization or to differends as *polemos*.<sup>9</sup> Thus the word *différance* (with an a) is to compensate economically—this loss of meaning, for *différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings. It is immediately and irreducibly polysemic, which will not be indifferent to the economy of my discourse here. In its polysemia this word, of course, like any meaning must defer to the discourse in which it occurs, its interpretive context; but in a way it defies deriving from the present participle (*différant*), thereby bringing us close to the very action of the verb differer, before it has even produced an

effect constituted as something different or as difference (with an e).<sup>10</sup> In a conceptuality adhering to classical strictures “différance” would be said to designate constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences. But because it brings us close to the infinitive and active kernel of *differer*, *différance* (with an a) neutralizes what the infinitive denotes as simply active, just as *mouvance* in our language does not simply mean the fact of moving, of moving oneself or of being moved. No more is resonance the act of resonating. We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending *-ance* remains undecided between the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like, the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these terms. For the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression.

*Différance* as temporization, *différance* as spacing. How are they to be joined?

Let us start, since we are already there, from the problematic of the sign and of writing. The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, “thing” here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the

being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. Whether we are concerned with the verbal or the written sign, with the monetary sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. What I am describing here in order to define it is the classically determined structure of the sign in all the banality of its characteristics—signification as the *différance* of temporization. And this structure presupposes that the sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and moving toward the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate. According to this classical semiology, the substitution of the sign for the thing itself is both secondary and provisional: secondary due to an original and lost presence from which the sign thus derives; provisional as concerns this final and missing presence toward which the sign in this sense is a movement of mediation.

## Notes

1. Translator's Note: Throughout this book I will translate *le propre* as "the proper." Derrida most often intends all the senses of the word at once: that which is correct, as in *le sens propre* (proper, literal meaning), and that which is one's own, that which may be owned, that which is legally, correctly owned—all the links between proper, property, and propriety.

2. TN. The last three sentences refer elliptically and

playfully to the following ideas. Derrida first plays on the “silence” of the a in *différance* as being like a silent tomb, like a pyramid, like the pyramid to which Hegel compares the body of the sign. “Tomb” in Greek is *oikosis*, which is akin to the Greek *oikos* (house) from which the word “economy” derives (*oikos*) house and *nemein*—to manage). Thus Derrida speaks of the “economy of death” as the “familial residence and tomb of the proper.” Further, and more elliptically still, Derrida speaks of the tomb, which always bears an inscription in stone, announcing the death of the tyrant. This seems to refer to Hegel’s treatment of the Antigone story in the *Phenomenology*. It will be recalled that Antigone defies the tyrant Creon by burying her brother Polynices. Creon retaliates by having Antigone entombed. There she cheats the slow death that awaits her by hanging herself. The tyrant Creon has a change of heart too late, and (after the suicides of his son and wife, his family) kills himself. Thus family, death, inscription, tomb, law, economy. In a later work, *Glas*, Derrida analyzes Hegel’s treatment of the Antigone.

3. TN. “. . . not fortuitously affiliated with the objectivity of *theorein* or understanding.” A play on words has been lost in translation here, a loss that makes this sentence difficult to understand. In the previous sentence Derrida says that the difference between the e and the a of *différance* / *différence* can neither be seen nor heard. It is not a sensible—that is, relating to the senses—difference. But, he goes on to explain, neither is this an intelligible difference, for the very names by which we conceive of objective intelligibility are already in complicity with sensibility. *Theorein*—the Greek origin of “theory”—literally means “to look at,” to see; and the word Derrida uses for “understanding” here is *entendement*, the noun form of *entendre*, to hear.

4. TN. As in the past, *etre* (Sein) will be translated as Being. *Etant* (Seiendes) will be either beings or being, depending on the context. Thus, here *étant-present* is “being-present.” For a justification of this translation see Derrida, *Writing and Différance*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), Translator’s Introduction, p. xvii.

5. TN. “ . . . a hole with indeterminable borders (for example, in a topology of castration).” This phrase was added to “*La Différance*” for its publication in the French edition of this volume and refers to the polemic Derrida had already engaged (in *Positions*, elaborated further in *le Facteur de la verité*) with Jacques Lacan. For Derrida, Lacan’s “topology of castration,” which assigns the “hole” or lack to a place (“a hole with determinable borders”) repeats the metaphysical gesture (albeit a negative one) of making absence, the lack, the hole, a transcendental principle that can be pinned down as such, and can thereby govern a theoretical discourse.

6. TN. The Greek *arkhe* combines the values of a founding principle and of government by a controlling principle (e.g. archeology, monarchy) will propose here will not be elaborated simply as a philosophical discourse operating according to principles, postulates, axioms or definitions, and proceeding along the discursive lines of a linear order of reasons. In the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. . Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field. Finally, a strategy without



finality, what might be called blind tactics or empirical wandering if the value of empiricism did not itself acquire its entire meaning in its opposition to philosophical responsibility. If there is a certain wandering in the tracing of *différance*, it no more follows the lines of philosophy of its symmetrical and integral inverse, empirical-logical discourse. The concept of play keeps itself beyond this opposition, announcing, on the eve of philosophy and beyond it, the unity of chance and necessity in calculations without end.

7. TN. In English the two distinct meanings of the Latin *differre* have become two separate words: to defer and to differ.

8. TN. The next few sentences will require some annotation, to be found in this note and the next two. In this sentence Derrida is pointing out that two words that sound exactly alike in French (*différents*, *différends*) refer to the sense of *differre* that implies spacing, otherness–difference in its usual English sense. *Les différents* are different things, *les différends* are differences of opinion, grounds for dispute—whence the references to allergy (from the Greek *allos*, other) and polemics.

9. TN. However, to continue the last note, difference (in French) does not convey the sense of active putting off, of deferring (*différance* in what would be its usual sense in French, if it were a word in common usage), or the sense of active polemical difference, actively differing with someone or something. (“Active” here, though, is not really correct for reasons that Derrida will explain below.) The point is that there is no noun-verb, no gerund for either sense in French.

10. TN. Such a gerund would normally be constructed from the present participle of the verb: *differant*.

Curiously then, the noun *différance* suspends itself between the two senses of *differant*–*deferring*, *differing*. We might say that it defers *differing*, and differs from *deferring*, in and of itself.

Here is a link to the translation.

## Close Reading in Deconstruction

In New Criticism, we learned to do a close reading of a text that focused on looking for elements of the text that demonstrated complexity and contributed to unity. A deconstructive close reading is similar in practice, but instead, we want to emphasize the instability of meaning and the idea that texts contain contradictions.

Here's a step-by-step guide on how to perform a close reading of a text using deconstruction as your critical method:

1. **Choose a Text:** Select a text that you want to analyze closely. This could be a literary work, a philosophical essay, a political speech, or any other written or spoken material such as an advertisement or TikTok video.

2. **Initial Reading:** Begin by reading the text once through without any specific agenda. This reading helps you grasp the surface meaning and overall structure of the text. In this reading, pay attention to your subjective reader response.

3. **Identify Binary Oppositions:** Deconstruction often focuses on binary oppositions or pairs of contrasting terms within a text (e.g., good vs. evil, presence vs. absence; light vs. dark; feminine vs. masculine). Identify these binary oppositions in the text. These will be essential to your analysis.

4. **Question Assumptions:** Start questioning the assumptions that underlie these binary oppositions. Deconstruction seeks to reveal how these opposites are interdependent and how they undermine each other. Look for

instances where the text blurs the lines between these opposites.

5. **Look for Ambiguities:** Deconstruction thrives on ambiguities and contradictions within a text. Pay close attention to passages or phrases that are open to multiple interpretations or that seem to contradict themselves.

6. **Identify Hierarchies:** Examine whether the text establishes hierarchies between the binary opposites. Which member of the binary opposition is preferred or privileged?

7. **Trace Patterns and Reversals:** Look for patterns or instances of reversals in the text. Derrida argued that texts often contain moments where the binary oppositions are subverted or reversed. Identify such instances and analyze their significance.

8. **Analyze Language and Wordplay:** Deconstruction places a heavy emphasis on the linguistic aspects of a text. Pay attention to wordplay, language choices, and the way language constructs meaning. Consider how certain words or phrases may carry hidden connotations.

9. **Formulate Your Thesis Statement:** Based on your analysis, formulate your interpretation of the text. Highlight the ambiguities, contradictions, and hidden meanings you've uncovered. Discuss how the text challenges traditional binary oppositions and hierarchies.

10. **Write Your Analysis:** Organize your findings into a coherent analysis. Start with an introduction that introduces the text and its context. Then, present your analysis in a structured manner, using evidence from the text to support your claims. Conclude by summarizing your key insights.

Keep in mind that deconstruction is a challenging and often abstract method of analysis. It requires careful attention to language and a willingness to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty in the text. It's also important to engage with the work of other scholars who have applied deconstruction to similar texts to refine your own interpretation.

## Applying Deconstruction Techniques to Literature

To learn more about how to apply deconstruction techniques to a text, we will read “The Glass Mountain” by Donald Barthelme. Donald Barthelme is widely considered to be the father of postmodern fiction. As we have learned throughout this course, literature and criticism exist in conversation with each other. Just as Archibald MacLeish’s poem “Ars Poetica” demonstrates the theory behind New Criticism analysis, Barthelme’s short story demonstrates awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of deconstruction. Ask yourself some questions as you read:

1. What is the genre of this short story? (Note: It will be helpful if you are not already familiar with these works to look up “The Glass Mountain” from the *Yellow Fairy Tale Book* by Andrew Lang)
2. Why are the lines numbered?
3. How are direct quotations used? Are they real or spurious? (you may have to do some Internet research to answer this question)
4. What is the glass mountain?
5. What does the narrator hope to achieve by climbing the glass mountain?
6. Who are his “acquaintances”?
7. What is the symbol?
8. What is the point of this story?

**“The Glass Mountain” by Donald**

## Barthelme

1. I was trying to climb the glass mountain.
2. The glass mountain stands at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue.
3. I had attained the lower slope.
4. People were looking up at me.
5. I was new in the neighborhood.
6. Nevertheless I had acquaintances.
7. I had strapped climbing irons to my feet and each hand grasped sturdy plumber's friend.
8. I was 200 feet up.
9. The wind was bitter.
10. My acquaintances had gathered at the bottom of the mountain to offer encouragement.
11. "Shithead."
12. "Asshole."



13. Everyone in the city knows about the glass mountain.
14. People who live here tell stories about it.
15. It is pointed out to visitors.
16. Touching the side of the mountain, one feels coolness.
17. Peering into the mountain, one sees sparkling blue-white depths.
18. The mountain towers over that part of Eighth Avenue like some splendid, immense office building.
19. The top of the mountain vanishes into the clouds, or on cloudless days, into the sun.
20. I unstuck the righthand plumber's friend leaving the lefthand one in place.
21. Then I stretched out and reattached the righthand one a little higher up, after which I inched my legs into new positions.
22. The gain was minimal, not an arm's length.
23. My acquaintances continued to comment.
24. "Dumb motherfucker."
25. I was new in the neighborhood.
26. In the streets were many people with disturbed eyes.
27. Look for yourself.
28. In the streets were hundreds of young people shooting up in doorways, behind parked cars.
29. Older people walked dogs.

30. The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder.

31. And someone had been apprehended cutting down trees, a row of elms broken-backed among the VWs and Valiants.

32. Done with a power saw, beyond a doubt.

33. I was new in the neighborhood yet I had accumulated acquaintances.

34. My acquaintances passed a brown bottle from hand to hand.

35. "Better than a kick in the crotch."

36. "Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick."

37. "Better than a slap in the belly with a wet fish."

38. "Better than a thump on the back with a stone."

39. "Won't he make a splash when he falls, now?"

40. "I hope to be here to see it. Dip my handkerchief in the blood."

41. "Fart-faced fool."

42. I unstuck the lefthand plumber's friend leaving the righthand one in place.

43. And reached out.

44. To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason.

45. No one has ever climbed the mountain on behalf of science, or in search of celebrity, or because the mountain was a challenge.

46. Those are not good reasons.
47. But good reasons exist.
48. At the top of the mountain there is a castle of pure gold, and in a room in the castle tower sits...
49. My acquaintances were shouting at me.
50. "Ten bucks you bust your ass in the next four minutes!"
51. ...a beautiful enchanted symbol.
52. I unstuck the righthand plumber's friend leaving the lefthand one in place.
53. And reached out.
54. It was cold there at 206 feet and when I looked down I was not encouraged.
55. A heap of corpses both of horses and riders ringed the bottom of the mountain, many dying men groaning there.
56. "A weakening of the libidinous interest in reality has recently come to a close." (Anton Ehrenzweig)<sup>1</sup>
57. A few questions thronged into my mind.
58. Does one climb a glass mountain, at considerable personal discomfort, simply to disenchant a symbol?
59. Do today's stronger egos still need symbols?
60. I decided that the answer to these questions was "yes."
61. Otherwise what was I doing there, 206 feet above the power-sawed elms, whose white meat I could see from my height?



62. The best way to fail to climb the mountain is to be a knight in full armor—one whose horse's hoofs strike fiery sparks from the sides of the mountain.

63. The following-named knights had failed to climb the mountain and were groaning in the heap: Sir Giles Guilford, Sir Henry Lovell, Sir Albert Denny, Sir Nicholas Vaux, Sir Patrick Grifford, Sir Gisbourne Gower, Sir Thomas Grey, Sir Peter Coleville, Sir John Blunt, Sir Richard Vernon, Sir Walter Willoughby, Sir Stephen Spear, Sir Roger Faulconbridge, Sir Clarence Vaughan, Sir Hubert Ratcliffe, Sir James Tyrrel, Sir Walter Herbert, Sir Robert Brakenbury, Sir Lionel Beaufort, and many others.<sup>2</sup>

64. My acquaintances moved among the fallen knights.

65. My acquaintances moved among the fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors.

66. "Calm reigns in the country, thanks to the confident wisdom of everyone." (M. Pompidou)<sup>3</sup>

67. The golden castle is guarded by a lean-headed eagle with blazing rubies for eyes.

68. I unstuck the lefthand plumber's friend, wondering if—

69. My acquaintances were prising out the gold teeth of not-yet dead knights.

70. In the streets were people concealing their calm behind a façade of vague dread.

71. "The conventional symbol (such as the nightingale, often associated with melancholy), even

though it is recognized only through agreement, is not a sign (like the traffic light) because, again, it presumably arouses deep feelings and is regarded as possessing properties beyond what the eye alone sees.” (A Dictionary of Literary Terms)

72. A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me.

73. A knight in pale pink armor appeared above me.

74. He sank, his armor making tiny shrieking sounds against the glass.

75. He gave me a sideways glance as he passed me.

76. He uttered the word “Muerte”<sup>4</sup> as he passed me.

77. I unstuck the righthand plumber’s friend.

78. My acquaintances were debating the question, which of them would get my apartment?

79. I reviewed the conventional means of attaining the castle.

80. The conventional means of attaining the castle are as follows: “The eagle dug its sharp claws into the tender flesh of the youth, but he bore the pain without a sound, and seized the bird’s two feet with his hands. The creature in terror lifted him high up into the air and began to circle the castle. The youth held on bravely. He saw the glittering palace, which by the pale rays of the moon looked like a dim lamp; and he saw the windows and balconies of the castle tower. Drawing a small knife from his belt, he cut off both the eagle’s feet. The bird rose up in the air with a yelp, and the youth dropped lightly onto a broad balcony. At the same moment a door opened, and he saw a courtyard filled with flowers

and trees, and there, the beautiful enchanted princess."  
(The Yellow Fairy Book)<sup>5</sup>

81. I was afraid.

82. I had forgotten the Band-aids.

83. When the eagle dug its sharp claws into my  
tender flesh—

84. Should I go back for the Band-aids?

85. But if I went back for the Band-aids I would have  
to endure the contempt of my acquaintances.

86. I resolved to proceed without the Band-aids.

87. "In some centuries, his [man's] imagination has  
made life an intense practice of all the lovelier  
energies." (John Masefield)<sup>6</sup>

88. The eagle dug its sharp claws into my tender  
flesh.

89. But I bore the pain without a sound, and seized  
the bird's two feet with my hands.

90. The plumber's friends remained in place,  
standing at right angles to the side of the mountain.

91. The creature in terror lifted me high in the air and  
began to circle the castle.

92. I held on bravely.

93. I saw the glittering palace, which by the pale rays  
of the moon looked like a dim lamp; and I saw the  
windows and balconies of the castle tower.

94. Drawing a small knife from my belt, I cut off both  
the eagle's feet.

95. The bird rose up in the air with a yelp, and I dropped lightly onto a broad balcony.

96. At the same moment a door opened, and I saw a courtyard filled with flowers and trees, and there, the beautiful enchanted symbol.

97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess.

98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances.

99. Who could be relied upon to deal with her.

100. Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment.

#### *Notes*

1 A (probably) spurious quotation by a (probably) fictitious person.

2 Names chosen or invented at random to represent English knighthood.

3 Former President of France. The quotation is probably spurious.

4 "Death."

5 One of a series of fairy tale collections edited by Andrew Lang.

6 Traditional English poet (1878-1967); he became Poet Laureate of England in 1930.

"The Glass Mountain" is from *City Life*. Pocket Books, 1978.

After completing a close reading of the text, you'll want to

come up with a thesis statement that you can support with the evidence you've found.

**Example of Deconstruction thesis statement:** In "The Glass Mountain," the impossibility of achieving shared meaning through text is demonstrated through the text's subversion of the fairy tale genre and a mockery of traditional symbolism.

While ChatGPT clearly still has some shortcomings as a writer, one of its strengths is pattern analysis. I asked ChatGPT to read the short story above and suggest some ideas for a deconstructive analysis of the text. Here are some of the ideas it came up with that would be worth exploring:

1. **Binary Oppositions:** The story establishes several binary oppositions, such as climbing vs. failing to climb the glass mountain, newness vs. familiarity in the neighborhood, and the conventional vs. unconventional means of attaining the castle. Deconstruction would involve questioning the stability and interdependence of these oppositions.
2. **Language and Wordplay:** Barthelme's use of language and wordplay is significant. The repetition of phrases like "I unstuck the [plumber's] friend," and the playful use of insults by acquaintances, highlight the importance of language in constructing meaning. Deconstruction would involve exploring how these linguistic elements challenge or subvert conventional interpretations.
3. **Symbols and Meaning:** The story introduces symbols like the glass mountain, the golden castle, and the beautiful enchanted symbol/princess. Deconstruction would inquire

into the shifting and multiple meanings these symbols carry and how they resist fixed interpretation.

4. **Contradictions and Ambiguities:** Throughout the story, there are contradictions and ambiguities, such as the purpose of climbing the glass mountain, the nature of the castle's inhabitant, and the fate of the beautiful princess. Deconstruction would focus on how these contradictions disrupt traditional narratives and hierarchies.
5. **Intertextuality:** The story references external texts and quotes, such as the ones from Anton Ehrenzweig, M. Pompidou, and "The Yellow Fairy Book." Deconstruction would investigate how these references add layers of meaning and ambiguity to the narrative. *(My note: most of these are fake references, just like ChatGPT provides fake references)*
6. **Narrative Perspective:** The narrative perspective shifts from first-person to third-person at various points, raising questions about the reliability and authority of the narrator. Deconstruction would examine how these shifts impact the reader's understanding of the text.
7. **Metafictional Elements:** The story contains metafictional elements where the narrator reflects on the act of storytelling and interpretation. Deconstruction would explore how these metafictional moments disrupt the boundaries between fiction and reality.

In a deconstructive analysis of "The Glass Mountain," you would aim to reveal how these elements interact, contradict, and undermine each other, ultimately challenging the stability of meaning within the text. Deconstruction invites readers to question the assumptions and hierarchies embedded in the text and to recognize the inherent ambiguity and complexity of language and narrative.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/ea6ac091-27e9-439a-aaa5-600def26738f>

# Deconstruction's Limitations

What is the point of a critical method that seeks to expose the gaps in meaning? As with any critical method, deconstruction has its limits and potential drawbacks. These include the following:

1. **Complexity and Obscurity:** Deconstruction is known for its complexity and abstract nature. This can make it difficult for both scholars and general readers to grasp and apply effectively. Deconstructive analyses can be dense and challenging to understand, which can limit its accessibility and practicality. This can lead to misunderstandings and even misrepresentation of both its goals and its methods.
2. **Skepticism and Relativism:** Deconstruction's emphasis on the instability of meaning and the critique of binary oppositions can lead to a form of skepticism and relativism. While this can be a valuable tool for questioning established power structures and hierarchies, it may also create a sense of nihilism. If there's no possibility of shared meaning, then what is the point?
3. **Lack of Constructive Solutions:** Deconstruction is often seen as a critical method that deconstructs existing texts and ideas but doesn't necessarily offer constructive solutions or alternative interpretations. Critics argue that it can be overly focused on critique without providing a clear path forward for understanding or interpreting texts.
4. **Challenges to Traditional Authority:** While I see this as more of a strength than a limitation per se, it's worth noting that deconstruction's challenge to traditional forms of authority in literature and philosophy can be unsettling for those who prefer more stable and conventional interpretations.
5. **Overemphasis on Textuality:** Deconstruction's focus on

the text and language can sometimes lead to an overemphasis on textual analysis at the expense of considering broader contextual factors, such as historical, cultural, or authorial intentions. This narrow focus may limit the scope of interpretation. Subsequent critical methodologies often use deconstructive approaches in conjunction with a consideration of context.

6. **Ethical Concerns:** Some critics argue that deconstruction's relativistic approach can be ethically problematic, as it may undermine moral and ethical judgments or lead to a lack of responsibility for the implications of certain texts. For me, personally, I worry that we are now living in the post-truth society that deconstruction anticipated more than 50 years ago, where "alternative facts" carry as much weight as regular boring facts.

Despite these limitations, deconstruction remains a valuable and influential critical method, particularly for its ability to challenge dominant interpretations and reveal hidden complexities within texts. However, its application should be balanced with other critical approaches and consideration of broader contextual factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of literature and culture.



## Structuralism and Deconstruction Scholars

These are some influential practitioners of structuralism and deconstruction

- Ferdinand de Saussure (Structuralism)
- Claude Levi-Strauss (Structuralism)
- Jacques Derrida (Deconstruction)
- Umberto Eco (Semiotics)
- Roland Barthes (Deconstruction)
- Jonathan Culler (Deconstruction)
- Paul de Man (Deconstruction)
- Richard Rorty (Deconstruction)

## Further Reading

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# 20. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Model Essay

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to augment thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to replace thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

## AI Model Essay: Deconstruction

### Delightful Devotion of Donne's 'The Canonization'

"The Canonization" by John Donne is a complex and

nuanced poem that can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. One critical method that can be used to analyze the poem is deconstruction, which is a method of critical analysis that seeks to understand the underlying assumptions and structures that shape a text.

Deconstruction begins by examining the language and imagery used in the text, paying close attention to the ways in which words and phrases are used to create meaning. In “The Canonization,” Donne uses a variety of literary devices, such as metaphor, simile, and imagery, to explore the theme of love and its many complexities.

One of the key elements of the poem is the use of the metaphor of canonization, which is the process of declaring someone a saint. Donne uses this metaphor to suggest that the love between the speaker and his beloved is so pure and powerful that it is worthy of sainthood. However, this metaphor also reveals the limitations of language and the ways in which words can never fully capture the complexity of human experience.

Another important aspect of the poem is the use of imagery, which is used to create vivid and evocative descriptions of the speaker’s feelings and emotions. For example, Donne describes the speaker’s love as a “fierce flame” and a “fierce joy,” which creates a sense of intensity and passion. However, this imagery also reveals the ways in which the speaker’s perceptions are shaped by his own subjective experience, which

suggests that there may be multiple ways to understand and interpret the poem.

Through deconstruction, we can also examine the ways in which the poem subverts traditional notions of love and relationships. Donne challenges the idea that love is something that can be easily defined and understood, instead suggesting that it is a complex and ever-changing phenomenon. This is evident in lines like “we cannot admit impediments” which shows that love is not something that can be constrained by societal norms or expectations.

In conclusion, “The Canonization” by John Donne is a rich and complex poem that can be understood and interpreted in a variety of ways. By using the critical method of deconstruction, we can gain a deeper understanding of the poem’s language, imagery, and themes, and explore the ways in which it subverts traditional notions of love and relationships.

## Annotations: “Delightful Devotion of Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

“The Canonization” by John Donne is a complex and nuanced poem that can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. One critical method that can be used to analyze the poem is **deconstruction**, which is a method of critical analysis that seeks to understand the **underlying assumptions** and **structures** that shape a text. **This entire first paragraph is basically what I like to call “warm up writing.” Compare this**

with how Derrida began the passage you read this week: “I will speak, therefore, of a letter.” One of the hallmarks of deconstruction in literary criticism is its playfulness. If you read a literary analysis that feels both particularly challenging and particularly “precious” or clever, chances are good you’re dealing with deconstruction. The overall definition of deconstruction is also not really accurate. It’s probably necessary to explain your critical method, but deconstruction argues that the underlying structures of a text are ultimately meaningless. In any case, have more fun with it!

Deconstruction begins by examining the **language and imagery** used in the text, paying close attention to the ways in which words and phrases are used to create **meaning**. In “The Canonization,” Donne uses a variety of **literary devices**, such as **metaphor, simile, and imagery**, to explore the **theme of love and its many complexities**. This is the closest thing to a thesis statement that I can find here, and it’s not a very good one for deconstruction. This thesis statement summarizes. It does not present an argument. A better approach is to consider how the use of these literary devices subverts the text’s stated meaning (an idea hinted at in the last line of this essay). While we would expect to see some overlap in terminology between New Criticism and deconstruction, we would also expect to see words like binary oppositions, privileged meanings, arbitrariness or ambiguity, etc.

One of the key elements of the poem is the use of the **metaphor** of canonization, which is the process of declaring someone a saint. Donne uses this metaphor to suggest that the love between the speaker and his beloved is so pure and powerful that it is worthy of sainthood. However, this metaphor also reveals the **limitations** of language and the ways in which words can never fully capture the complexity of human experience. Okay, the Chatbot was right to focus on the metaphor of canonization for this type of deconstruction.

However, instead of focusing on the stated meaning of the metaphor, a deconstructive approach would move one step further to show how the use of this metaphor is actually absurd and degrades the meaning of sainthood.

Another important aspect of the poem is the use of imagery, which is used to create vivid and evocative descriptions of the speaker's feelings and emotions. For example, Donne describes the speaker's love as a "fierce flame" and a "fierce joy," which creates a sense of intensity and passion. However, this imagery also reveals the ways in which the speaker's perceptions are shaped by his own subjective experience, which suggests that there may be **multiple ways to understand and interpret** the poem. I don't know what this paragraph actually means. Do you? Yes, of course, there are "multiple ways to understand and interpret the poem." When we do deconstruction, we want to consider which meanings are privileged or preferred, and which meanings are silent. We would look for binary opposites to explore this idea. The binary opposite of man and woman, exemplified in bird imagery, would be one place to start. Another is the binary opposition of saint and sinner. Obviously some people think these two lovers are actually sinners. What meaning does the poem privilege?

Through deconstruction, we can also examine the ways in which the poem **subverts** traditional notions of love and relationships. Donne **challenges the idea** that love is something that can be easily defined and understood, instead suggesting that it is a **complex and ever-changing** phenomenon. This is evident in lines like "we cannot admit impediments" which shows that love is not something that can be constrained by **societal norms** or **expectations**. We will explore these ideas more when we look at New Historical criticism, which was based on the ideas of deconstruction. Any time we are challenging conventional meanings, we are

engaging in some form of deconstruction. This will be useful for you to keep in mind as you practice this critical method.

In conclusion, “The Canonization” by John Donne is a rich and complex poem that can be understood and interpreted in a **variety** of ways. By using the critical method of deconstruction, we can gain a deeper understanding of the poem’s language, imagery, and themes, and explore the ways in which it **subverts** traditional notions of love and relationships. If I were grading this essay, it would score very low for this type of criticism. It’s really more of a New Criticism approach with a few ideas from deconstruction sprinkled in.

Since I know that ChatGPT is “learning,” I asked it to write this essay again and to include the term *differánce*. I have posted its revised essay below. I also asked it to include a playful title, which is one of the hallmarks of this critical approach. This second essay is a better example of deconstruction but still rather prosaic and dull.

## AI Model Essay Part Two: A Second Attempt

### “Differánce in the Delightful Devotion of Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

John Donne’s poem “The Canonization” is a rich and



complex work that lends itself to a deconstructive analysis. Deconstruction, as a critical method developed by Jacques Derrida, emphasizes the instability of language and the multiple meanings embedded within texts. In “The Canonization,” we can explore how this poem challenges binary oppositions and reveals the concept of “différance” in its intricate web of language and imagery.

The poem begins with the speaker addressing an unnamed individual who questions the intensity of the speaker’s love, suggesting that it prevents them from pursuing worldly success. The poem’s title, “The Canonization,” implies a process of sanctification or elevation to a higher status. However, this process is far from straightforward, and deconstruction allows us to delve into the complexities within the text.

One of the key concepts in deconstruction is “différance,” a term coined by Derrida. Différance suggests that language is characterized by differences and deferrals rather than stable, fixed meanings. In “The Canonization,” we see how the poem plays with this idea. The speaker argues that their love should be elevated to the status of canonization, aligning it with religious sanctification. However, this is not a straightforward process. The act of “canonization” is itself disrupted by the poem’s intricate language and imagery.

The poem presents a series of binary oppositions, such as love vs. worldly success, sacred vs. profane, and spiritual vs. material. These oppositions are central to the poem’s exploration of love and its elevation to a higher status. However, deconstruction invites us to

question the stability of these binaries. For instance, the poem blurs the boundary between sacred and profane love, suggesting that the intensity of the speaker's love is a form of devotion in its own right.

The language in "The Canonization" is full of paradoxes and contradictions. The speaker's love is described as both "dull sublunary lovers' love" and "deserving of a place in the heavens." This linguistic play disrupts the binary between earthly and divine love, emphasizing the fluidity and instability of meaning.

Additionally, the poem challenges conventional interpretations of love and success. The speaker rejects worldly achievements, suggesting that their love is more profound. However, this rejection is not a straightforward condemnation of the material world. Instead, it highlights the interdependence and difference between these opposing concepts.

In "The Canonization," John Donne's use of language and imagery invites readers to deconstruct the traditional boundaries between love, religion, and worldly success. Through paradoxes, contradictions, and linguistic play, the poem reveals the complexities and ambiguities within these concepts. Deconstruction, with its focus on difference and the instability of meaning, allows us to appreciate the intricate web of language and ideas that Donne weaves in this thought-provoking poem. Ultimately, "The Canonization" challenges us to question and reevaluate our preconceived notions about love, devotion, and the boundaries that define them.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/ea6ac091-27e9-439a-aaa5-600def26738f>

## You Try It!

Choose one of your favorite poems. Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that applies deconstruction as a critical method to analyze the poem. Then analyze the AI-generated essay. Is the theory correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses deconstruction and the poem you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

# 21. Student Essay Example:

## Deconstruction

The following student essay example of Deconstruction is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif."

### **Beyond Black and White: Deconstructing Race in "Recitatif"**

*by Charlie Russell*

The one, glaring question we all have when reading "Recitatif" is: *which character is which race?* There are many context clues given by Morrison in the story, but in most circumstances, these clues cannot be used to determine the race of either girl in the story because of the ambiguousness of the specificities she gives us. This essay's purpose is not to determine which character is which race; but to discuss the contradictions that arise in the context and descriptions of each character.

We are first introduced to Roberta and Twyla when they are eight years old and are "dumped" (Morrison 2) at St. Bonaventure shelter. Twyla often comments that they "weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky" (Morrison 2). Our first clues to which girl is which race appears in the first page of the story. Twyla's mother preferred to dance to caring for her daughter, and Roberta's mother was sick. When

the two girls are introduced, Twyla thinks to herself that she is unhappy to be placed in a room with a girl of another race, and remembers her mother saying, “they never wash their hair and they smell funny” (Morrison 1). These context clues are not enough to place either character in either category. A neglectful mother or a sick one do not denote race. In both cultures, there is commentary akin to this about hair. Twyla’s first comment can be taken in many ways. Would her mother be upset that she was put in a room with a girl of another race, or would she be upset that Twyla was put in a dirty, dank room, and the race of Roberta was merely what she saw and thought about first?

In Elizabeth Abel’s piece, “Black Writing, White Reading: Race and The Politics of Feminist Interpretation”, she points out that in this first section of the book, “The racial ambiguity so deftly installed at the narrative’s origin through codes that function symmetrically for black women and for white women intensifies as the story tracks the encounter of its two female protagonists over approximately thirty years” (Abel 1-2). This racial ambiguity is also present in both character’s mothers. Where Twyla’s mother is beautiful but self-centered, Roberta’s mother is large, wears a large cross, and carries a bible. Mary also has a habit of drawing out the syllables and vowels of her daughter’s name, following it with “baby”, and forgets to bring her food for lunch. Roberta’s mother is attentive and feeds her daughter well while reading to her from the bible.

It is possible that we may think of Roberta’s mother as a black woman, someone who was ill and therefore simply unable to care for her daughter. She seems loving and nurturing and religious in a stern but soft way, feeding and caring for her daughter where she can. It is also possible to think of Twyla’s mother as a black woman, someone who dances all night without a care in the world, who has a drawl and is not terribly bright, leaning into the racism of the day in which the story was written. However, we tend to think of big, strong women who

love Jesus as black women because of the media we consume and the way the black woman has been portrayed as a mother figure; and we also tend to think of wispy thin women that ride on the back of other's kindness as white.

Abel comments that while she was certain that Twyla was white, the person who introduced her to the story was sure that she was black. Wanting an answer to her question, she contacted Morrison and asked. She reports that Morrison did not have a direct answer to her question but did make a few pointed comments on how her "project in this story was to substitute class for racial codes" (Abel 7). Abel finds that examining the class of both women throughout the flashes of their lives that we are made privy to seems to point in the direction of Twyla's whiteness, but we can never know for sure.

What I think gets missed is Morrison's desire for us to read this piece with the awareness that we all assume race based on class. Twyla ends up working class, and Roberta marries a man who is a part of the middle class. In the time in which the story is set, our gut instinct would be to assign Twyla as black and Roberta as white, solely based on the fact that Twyla must work harder than Roberta, and because Twyla remarks later, "Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" (Morrison 9). Roberta feels more carefree in her older years, even as a young adult, meeting Twyla again for the first time in years where Twyla was waitressing while she sits in a booth with two bearded men. Roberta is described as wearing large hoops and having big hair (which could be a sign of either race in the time of Hendrix), while Twyla makes a faux pas when she pretends to know who Hendrix is, probably due to the fact that her life was hard work and little play. It is hard to say here where each clue points. Jimi Hendrix, according to Abel, was not as popular with African American people at the time as he was with white people. Both races of men wore facial hair, but black men are better at growing it. Twyla works hard, while Roberta seems to be skimming along in life without a care.

Each point of interest contradicts the other, and because of this, it is impossible to determine the race of either girl, even if we used base assumptions determined by stereotypes.

In their essay, "Decoding Racial Identity of the Character in 'Recitatif'", Wang Li-Li concludes that "she [Morrison] illustrates how the difference between the races in American culture at large is dependent on blacks and whites defining themselves in opposition to one another" (Li-Li 1). Li-Li goes on to attempt to "decode" Morrison's created paradox by examining their names, eventually establishing that both names are simultaneously both black and white; even going so far as to try to resolve the question as to what Twyla's mother does when she dances all night, wondering whether that could mean she was a stripper. Most people may assume that Twyla was black simply because of her unconventional name. However, Abel argues in her journal, "...if Twyla's name is more characteristically black than white, it is perhaps best known as the name of a white dancer, Twyla Tharp, whereas Roberta shares her last name, Fisk, with a celebrated black (now integrated) university" (Abel 7). The push and pull of each name and the weight of race it carries is impossible to decode.

Later in the story, after the meeting in Howard Johnson's and after meeting in the grocery store years after that, the women meet again by chance while Roberta is picketing with a crowd of mothers against having her stepchildren bussed to a school outside of the neighborhood. In this scene, racial tensions run high to mirror the "racial strife" (Morrison 14) that is occurring elsewhere in the country. Twyla originally has no opinion on the change because her son didn't seem to mind it, but after seeing and speaking with Roberta, her mind changes. When Twyla tells Roberta that it is a silly thing to worry about, Roberta tells her that it is a free country, and Twyla retorts with, "Not yet, but it will be" (Morrison 15). Twyla could be realizing here that if she is indeed black, she is not treated with the same respect as a white woman. As the women argue, Twyla begs Roberta to

see the women as she does, and Roberta sees them as simply mothers. Roberta says, “I used to curl your hair” (Morrison 15). This line switches up the race of both again, because if Twyla were black, her hair would most likely already be very curly.

The conversation comes to the subject of Maggie, the “kitchen woman with legs like parentheses” (Morrison 2). Maggie comes up in quite a few of their conversations and is as racially ambiguous as both the girls. Roberta tells Twyla that she was black, and when she fell in the orchard, it was because she was pushed. When the women argue in adulthood about the school situation, Roberta insists that when Maggie was pushed, they all kicked her while she was on the ground, saying, “...you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn’t even scream” (Morrison 16). When they meet for the last time in the diner where Twyla goes in to have coffee after frantically looking for a Christmas tree, Maggie arises again with Roberta when she comes in wearing a shiny evening gown. Roberta seems to be feeling as guilty as Twyla does about her. Roberta cries when she makes excuses for both of them and how they grew up. She seems to know even less than Twyla does about Maggie, and although she has such a small part in the story, suddenly the story has always been about Maggie. Maggie has been the embodiment of the two characters all along.

I would be remiss if I did not turn the lens to myself, as well. As a white woman, am I doing the work I need to be doing to understand that I know only half of this story? Even then, that would still only be true if Twyla were in fact white. If Twyla was indeed a white working-class woman, then I could understand some of her life experiences as a white working-class woman. I do not and cannot understand the situation in either case of the black person. As I first read this story, at different points, I was convinced that either girl was either race. I flip-flopped back and forth, trying to decide based on what little, if anything, I know about any other person’s life



experience. I concluded that therein lay the reason that Morrison wrote this story in this particular way: to simply turn your gaze within yourself and observe how you attempted to determine the race of the girls. Most of us use the context that Morrison gives us, and we cannot guess in the end because they interweave and contradict one another until they are both and neither. The point of the story is not to try to assign race; the point is to learn about yourself and how you view the world and make the necessary corrections.

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## 22. Practicing Deconstruction

Now that you've learned about structuralism and deconstruction, practiced deconstruction with "The Glass Mountain," and reviewed some examples, you will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using deconstruction as your approach. You will read three different texts below. Choose one text and respond to the questions in a short essay (500-750 words). I have included questions to guide your reading. You may choose to respond to some or all of these questions; however, your response should be written as a short essay, and you will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text. Post your short essay as a response to the Deconstruction Theoretical Response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

### Checklist for Deconstruction

Remember, when using the deconstruction approach, the goal is to closely examine the text itself and look for ways in which the text undercuts its own stated or preferred meaning. You'll do this by looking for binary opposites, difference (how the text contains

its own contradiction), arbitrary meanings, and how one pair of binary opposites is privileged over the other.

1. Identify the oppositions that are present in the text.
2. Determine which member of the binary opposite pair seems to be preferred by the text.
3. Look for evidence that contradicts this preferred or favored meaning.
4. Expose how this evidence undercuts the text's meaning.

You should also consider things like form and genre. Make sure you understand what the text's stated or preferred meaning is before you start to look for the gap between that stated meaning and what the text actually says.

## 1. Death, be not proud (1633)

*By John Donne*

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

## Questions

1. **What is the form of this poem?** What type of poem do we traditionally associate with this form (think of Shakespeare or Petrarch)? How does the choice of this form complicate our interpretation of this poem?
2. **What assumptions do we have to have in order to make the claim the poem is making?** Look closely at the last line. How could this line be used to turn the poem's stated meaning against itself?
3. **Who is the poem's audience?** How does the stated audience differ from the real audience? How does our knowledge of the real audience affect our reading of the poem and what it is trying to accomplish?
4. **Find one line in the poem and look for contradictions within that line.** For example, line 9 says that "Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men." But if the stated audience is death, why is this line problematic? Can someone be a slave and also be dead—or be Death? (Steven Lynn, *Texts and Contexts*, p. 140).

## 2. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926)

*By Langston Hughes*

*Dedicated to W.E.B. DuBois*

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

## Questions

1. **How does the poem play with language and meaning?**

Explore how Hughes uses language in the poem. Are there any words or phrases that have multiple meanings or connotations? How do these linguistic ambiguities challenge conventional interpretations?

2. **What binary oppositions are present in the poem, and how are they subverted?** How does the poem blur the boundaries between these opposing concepts or disrupt traditional hierarchies associated with them?

3. **What role does time and history play in the poem?**

Examine how the poem addresses the concept of time, from ancient rivers to the present. How does it disrupt linear notions of time and history, and what implications does this have for the poem's meaning?

4. **What are the implications of the "I" in the poem?**

Investigate the identity of the speaker ("I") in the poem. How does the poem deconstruct the idea of a fixed, stable self or subject? Does the "I" represent a collective identity, and if so, what does this say about the fluidity of identity

and subjectivity?

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/1da499ec-2c38-41aa-bc9c-fc0dd99351ef>

### 3. Apple Computer Advertisement (1980)



**What kind of man owns his own computer?**

Rather revolutionary, the whole idea of owning your own computer? Not if you're a diplomat, printer, scientist, inventor... or a kite designer, too. Today there's Apple Computer. It's designed to be a *personal* computer. To uncomplicate your life. And make you more effective.

**It's a wise man who owns an Apple.**

If your time means money, Apple can help you make more of it. In an age of specialists, the most successful specialists stay away from uncreative drudgery. That's where Apple comes in.

Apple is a real computer, right to the core. So just like big computers, it manages data, crunches numbers, keeps records, processes your information and prints reports. You concentrate on what you do best. And let Apple do the rest. Apple makes that easy with three programming languages—including Pascal—that let you be your own software expert.

**Apple, the computer worth not waiting for.**

Time waiting for access to your company's big mainframe is time wasted. What you need in your department—

on your desk—is a computer that answers only to you... Apple Computer. It's less expensive than timesharing. More dependable than distributed processing. Far more flexible than centralized EDP. And, at less than \$2500 (as shown), downright affordable.

**Visit your local computer store.**

You can join the personal computer revolution by visiting the Apple dealer in your neighborhood. We'll give you his name when you call our toll free number (800) 538-9696. In California, (800) 662-9238.

Apple Computer, 10260 Bandley Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.



CIRCLE NO. 5 ON FREE INFORMATION CARD

From <https://makinghistoryatmacquarie.wordpress.com/2013/11/19/changing-representations-of-the-home-computer-in-home-computer-advertising-since-the-1980s/>

## Questions

1. **What is the most obvious statement this advertisement makes?** What sorts of attitudes, feelings, and assumptions does the advertisement assume its audience has? What effect does it try to create?
2. **How could the advertisement undercut its own stated meaning?** Does the advertisement do contradictory things?
3. **Which audiences or meanings are excluded or suppressed?** Deconstruction insists that texts must exclude or suppress some meanings while privileging others. For example, the advertisement focuses on how the computer is easy to use, but it also states that you need to know three programming languages. And there are some people who are conspicuously absent both from the text and the images.
4. **Do you see anything arbitrary or absurd here?** For example, how does the image of Ben Franklin work (or not work) in this advertisement?

## Theoretical Response Assignment Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.



# Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called “Practicing [Theoretical Approach].” (For example, “Practicing New Criticism”) Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps “Recuerdo” by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.

**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you’ve chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*

# 23. Deconstruction

## Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=409#oembed-1>*

### Slide One

Welcome! I'm Dr. Liza Long, and in this presentation, we're going to go over structuralism and deconstruction. I just want to say before we get started, prepare to have your mind blown wide open. Up to this point, probably much of what we've studied in Critical Worlds has felt at least somewhat familiar to you. We covered New Criticism, from which we took the tool of close reading, also reader response, where we learned the importance of subjective reader response to texts.

But with deconstruction, we're going to try something that will probably feel new to most of you. So hang on and have fun! With deconstruction, we are going to open the text to a variety of interpretations while exploring how there's an inevitable gap between the text's meaning and what the reader takes from the text. Deconstruction of a text does not really focus on the text itself as we did with New Criticism or on the reader as

we did with reader response. Instead, our target and the focus of our analysis is the gap, or as French philosopher Jacques Derrida called it, the *différance* that is present in every text and act of reading.

I'm sure you are wondering what I mean by the gap. Basically, for deconstructionists, true shared meaning is impossible. By the way, when I try to type the word *différance*, autocorrect in Word does not like it at all. And that's partly Derrida's point with this neologism, or as he preferred to call it, a neographism—a new written signifier of an idea that describes the inevitable gap between the signifier and how this signifier will be interpreted. The word itself is a play on the French word difference, which has two meanings in French. It means both difference and deferral. By the way, difference and *différance* sound the same in French, a fact which “performs” Derrida's point about language to some extent. The context-relative nature of words creates the gap at the heart of deconstruction.

## Slide Two

To understand this concept, we first need an overview of structuralism, the theory that preceded it. The term semiotics refers to the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. This can be extrapolated to language and text, where words are signs or signifiers of meaning. In structuralism, scholars such as anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss were interested in the work of the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In the early 1900s, de Saussure had the insight, which may seem obvious to some of us now, that language was really kind of two things. He described this difference (spelled with an e) between parole (the individual act of speaking) and langue (the underlying structure of language that gives meaning to the word in context).

It's important to note that langue is both the rules of

grammar *and* the societal conventions that surround language. In order to be understood as an individual speaker (parole), we need to follow the rules, the langue. Every language has its own rules. The meaning of parole, according to Saussure, depends on langue, and without both parole and langue, there can be no shared meaning. Our sense of meaning actually depends on those underlying linguistic structures of our native language.

Levi-Strauss, the anthropologist, built on this idea to propose that the meaning of words are context-dependent on the linguistic structures of the particular language, and since different languages have different underlying structures, meaning can be difficult to share across cultures. For example, you may have heard that the Russians have no word for blue. In fact, they have several words for varying shades of blue. Similarly, Inuit peoples have multiple words for snow, a word that is culturally significant to them. The structure of our language can help determine how we shape meaning.

But shared meaning also depends on the individual meaning in parole. A sentence can follow the rules of langue and still not have meaning. For example, consider this grammatically correct English sentence: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. While each part of speech in this sentence functions according to the rules of English grammar, the meaning of the individual words in this instance contradict each other.

Structuralists look for signifiers or signs of meaning (the term you may see for this is semiotics). In literary analysis, structuralism challenges the idea that texts reflect reality, instead viewing them as works constituted from linguistic structures and situated among other texts. Structuralism looks for binary oppositions in language. As with New Criticism, the goal of a structuralist literary analysis is to find universal meaning in texts by looking at their underlying structures. It's important to this type of approach to consider language as

a closed system, one with rules that can be known. This type of approach is popular in studying comparative mythology, where Levi-Strauss looks for mythemes, or units of story, that occur across culture.

With this approach, a sign (such as a written word) operates within a linguistic system to signify the meaning that the writer wants to convey, bridging the gap between the world of ideas and the world of material things. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato had a similar idea in mind with his theory of the forms. We might all recognize this object as a chair; the ideal form of a chair is the perfect form, a sense of “chairness.” This approach works well enough with concrete nouns, but it becomes much more difficult when we try to define or signify abstract concepts like “love.”

## Slide Three

Deconstruction suggests that it's not actually possible to bridge that gap between one mind and another with language, and that in fact, meaning is not stable or universal—words can mean different things in different times to different people. As we noted earlier, deconstruction challenges the very notion that meaning can ever be truly shared or captured in a text. For Derrida, the binary can always be deconstructed. The apparent opposition in language is actually hierarchical, which means that one opposite is always privileged over the other one—light privileged over dark, for example. If we temporarily privilege the term with lower hierarchical status, we can show that the meaning of the two opposites are actually intertwined, which makes the idea of binary opposition meaningless. Basically, watch *Deadpool* to see how this works.

*Différance* is concerned with how meanings shift and interact. Derrida wants to undercut our essential trust in logos,

a Greek word that means both word (literally) and reason. Derrida encourages us to mind the gap, not necessarily between the author's meaning and the reader's understanding, but more between the text's preferred meaning independent of the author (which depends on the author's culture) and other possible meanings of the text.

Derrida is most often credited as the first practitioner of this particular critical theory, but there are other influential scholars including both Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Yes, this started with French academia, but it became hugely influential in academic circles and in literary analysis. If you haven't watched it already, I would recommend the Lindsay Ellis "Death of the Author" video as an introduction to this approach.

Derrida famously refused to define what deconstruction is. Instead, he would speak about what it's not. Perhaps his most famous quote is this: "There is nothing outside the text" (*Of Grammatology*, page 158). This seems to imply that we can't go outside of language to find meaning. Anything we say will always depend on the meaning of something else (meaning is referential). You'll get a feel both for Derrida's playfulness and the complexity of his approach to meaning when you read the short passage on *différance*.

On a personal note, I was able to attend a lecture that Derrida gave at the University of California Irvine after President Clinton was impeached in 2000. The lecture was entitled "Le Perjure" (the liar). Derrida talked about what lying is when we have no stable meaning for words. His ideas seem really prescient now in light of our ubiquitous "alternative facts" media culture. I think we're actually seeing these ideas of post modernism and deconstruction play out in real time, with real-world consequences. We're observing that meaning is not stable. There really is a gap.

## Slide Four

Postmodernism is the literary school of writing that developed in conversation with deconstruction as a literary theory. Your reading is Donald Barthelme's short story, "The Glass Mountain." Barthelme is widely considered the father of postmodern literature, I think it's helpful for you to see how these literary theories play out in the real world. For writers, reading this short story will help you to conceptualize what deconstruction and post modernism looks like, from a creative writing standpoint.

I like to look at art when I teach deconstruction because I think it's helpful to understand that many of these ideas in literature and literary criticism were also evolving in tandem (or perhaps a bit later) than ideas in the art world. Here I have three self-portraits that Picasso created. Picasso is widely associated with the artistic approach known as cubism, which deconstructs an image to its essential elements and considers multiple perspectives. The first self-portrait here was painted when Picasso was a teenager, the second one in middle age, and the third one was painted when he was 89 years old. You'll notice that when he was 15, his self-portrait looks very realistic, right? His style evolved as he deconstructed himself and his image. We can see this in this visual example some of the principles of deconstructing a text.

Just as we focused on the text with New Criticism, Derrida brings that same approach in deconstruction. We start with a close reading of the text, and you only need to focus on the text you have. But instead of looking for how complexity leads to a unity, you'll go one step further. You'll look at how oppositions that exist in the text are actually arbitrary and how they undercut the text's meaning.

Where we look for things like irony or tension in New Criticism, with deconstruction, we're actually going to look for absurdity. Find the text's preferred meaning first. How does



the text want you to read it? Then look for ways that the text contradicts itself. You want to pay close attention to any place you see a gap between the text's preferred meaning and the reader's understanding of that text.

## Slide Five

Consider this text: a sign that says, "No animals allowed except seeing eye dogs." You may have seen a sign like this outside a store. What does this text mean? How does context shape our understanding of its meaning? What does the sign want us to take as its meaning? And how can the text be read in ways that undercut or subvert that preferred meaning? We might agree, or we might not—that's the point of deconstruction—that the sign's preferred meaning is that the only animals allowed in the store are service animals (with their human sight-impaired owners accompanying them of course). But is that really what the sign says? Since people are animals, must visually impaired people, whom this sign is doubtless meant to help, remain outside the store while their dogs are allowed to enter? And which dogs are excluded from this text? Only seeing eye dogs are permitted; others are not. Also, we must consider that the people whom this sign is intended to help, the visually impaired, will not be able to benefit from this sign because they cannot see it. What, then, is the point of this sign?

## Slide Six

At this point, if you're wondering what the point of a critical theory that seeks to show how shared meaning is impossible might be, think about the way that this approach can build empathy and humility. Instead of destroying the text's

meaning, we seek to explore multiple possible meanings, to open the text to additional voices. We don't have to be so concerned with finding the "right" meaning. Learning to be critical of texts in this way encourages you to question and evaluate your own positions and opinions as well as those found in the vast information stream that constantly bombards our waking moments in the 21st century. By encouraging us to examine how a text might actually have the opposite of its intended effect, deconstruction can help us to become more careful readers and writers. This method may also help us to see what the text excludes—which meanings are privileged, and which are silenced and to ask ourselves questions about why those voices are silenced.

So how do we do deconstruction? Here's a short checklist you could follow:

1. Identify the oppositions that are present in the text.
2. Determine which member seems to be preferred by the text.
3. Look for evidence that contradicts this preferred or favored meaning.
4. Expose how this evidence undercuts the text's meaning.

The place to start when you practice deconstruction is to think about the norm or the convention for the text. You'll want to pay attention to form and genre, just as you would with New Criticism. What are the things we would expect that text to do within its form or genre? Then look for oppositions in the text and look for a meaning or a theme that the text seems to favor. Which words lead you to conclude that this is the text's meaning?

So far, this looks like our traditional analysis of theme. But we're going to move one step further when we do deconstruction. Now that we know the genre and the privileged meaning, we are going to look for ways that the

text undercuts or contradicts or subverts the genre and the privileged meaning. You're really looking for clues in the text, just like you did with New Criticism, but this time, the clues will lead you to gaps in meaning. You're looking for ways that the text wants to direct us toward a sense of meaning, and then the ways in which the text fails to do this. You're exposing those failures, those gaps.

I encourage you to have fun with this. One of the hallmarks of this type of criticism is its playfulness and sense of absurdity. Let's consider "The Glass Mountain" again. This text references a Polish fairy tale, also entitled "The Glass Mountain." Compare Barthelme's story with the genre conventions of traditional folk and fairy tales. As an aside, Barthelme is one of my favorite authors. I first encountered him as a first-year college student when I read his short novel *Snow White*, which is still one of my favorite books. It opened up the possibilities of literature for me, and similarly, deconstruction opens up all kinds of texts to new and interesting interpretations. Deconstruction will be foundational as we learn about New Historical, post-colonial, post-feminist, and queer theory. These ideas will be really important to understanding how literary analysis has progressed. Deconstruction was the foundation for where literary analysis moved from the 1970s to the present.

## Slide Seven

I use an image here that shows once again how meaning can be arbitrary. This is a famous painting from Rene Magritte, and it says "this is not a pipe" in French under a picture of the pipe. If you initially protest, think about it. Of course, the statement is true. This is not a pipe—it's a *picture* of a pipe. It's a signifier. And only someone who knows the cultural connections will understand what this is a picture of. I could show many of you a picture of a floppy disk, the storage method for computers

in the early 1980s, and you would have no cultural context to understand that picture.

When you're working on your theoretical responses this week, make sure you are using these terms in your analysis of your chosen text.

- **Arbitrary** captures the idea that shared meaning really depends on us agreeing that something means something. Think about the word love again, for example. What does the word love mean? Any abstract noun could be an arbitrary word.
- The idea of **binary opposition** comes from structuralism, as we learned, but deconstruction seeks to undercut any sense of meaning from the binary opposites.
- We spent a lot of time on **différance** already, and you'll read about this from Derrida himself. As a reminder, it's both the idea of difference in meaning and deferral, meaning maybe we can't actually know the meaning of something until later. Think about a book that you read as a child that maybe you've returned to as an adult that maybe that meaning has changed.
- **Dispersal** is another characteristic of deconstruction. Meaning is scattered, it's not unified in the text, which is the opposite conclusion from New Criticism. Even though the methodology is similar, you have a different goal with deconstruction.
- **Opposition:** this is part of our understanding of the binary, but an inevitable consequence of looking at binary opposites is that we start to realize how absurd they are. Things are never black and white; there are many shades of gray (and chartreuse and vermillion, to quote "The Glass Mountain"). Deconstruction can help is to find our "blind spots" when we read and analyze literature.
- **Privilege** has become this loaded term in our culture, but for the purposes of literary analysis, this is where we're

exploring how the text favors certain meanings over other possible meanings that it does not favor, and you would comment on, on how certain meanings are favored within the text, other meanings are excluded, or you could talk about meanings that were excluded.

## Slide Eight

So what are some limitations of this theory? I've alluded to this previously, but an obvious limitation can be found in the pitfalls of cultural relativism. If any meaning is allowed, if there is no shared meaning, then what is the point of even trying to communicate? How can civil societies function if we can't agree what a stop sign means—not to mention bigger ideas like democracy? While deconstruction is useful in questioning norms and conventions, many of these norms and conventions exist for good reasons. However, in the act of forcing us to examine structures, hierarchies, and privileges, we can open our minds to more possibilities than the text previously held. I want to stress here that it's important to be careful and avoid a cynical approach to texts. Instead, I ask you to emphasize curiosity and keep an open mind as you practice deconstruction.

I'm sure you'll have lots of questions as you dive into the reading this week. One of them may be, "Do I need to learn French?" and the answer, if you're an English major who plans to continue your studies in this discipline, is "probably." But what I would really encourage you to do is have fun with it. Deconstruction at its heart is very playful. It's an interesting new approach to text. Challenge yourself to think outside the box, think differently, look for those gaps in meaning. And keep in mind that by challenging the preferred meaning of texts, deconstruction opens those texts to new ideas and considerations that were previously excluded from

analysis—and it also played an influential role in opening “the canon” to more voices.

## 24. Feedback

I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)



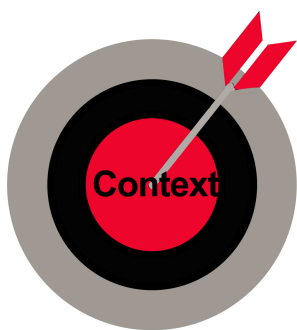
*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cw.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=411>*





## SECTION V

# CONTEXT: NEW HISTORICISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

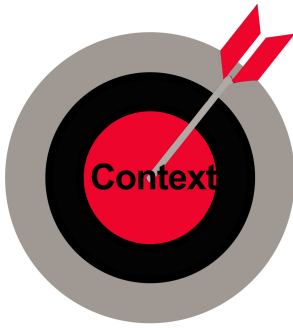


*New Historicism and Cultural Studies scrutinize literary works by interweaving them with historical and cultural contexts, emphasizing the reciprocal influence between literature and the socio-political conditions to reveal the complex interplay of power, ideology, and discourse. In the following*

*chapters, you will learn more about these types of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*



# 25. What Is New Historicism? What Is Cultural Studies?



New Historicism and Cultural Studies criticism are both literary theories and critical approaches that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. They both focus on the relationship between literature and its historical/cultural context. New Historicism rejects the idea of literary works as isolated,

timeless creations and instead emphasizes their embeddedness in the socio-political and cultural conditions of the time in which they were written. Cultural studies emphasizes the role of literary texts within a broader interdisciplinary approach to culture and may consider an older text's contemporary reception as part of that approach.

When we use New Historicism or cultural studies as our lens, we seek to understand literature and culture by examining the historical and cultural contexts in which literary works were produced and by exploring the ways in which literature and culture influence and are influenced by social and political power dynamics. For our exploration of these critical methods, we will consider the literary work's *context* as the center of our target.

New Historicism is often associated with the work of Stephen Greenblatt, who argued that literature is not a timeless

reflection of universal truths, but rather a product of the historical and cultural contexts in which it was produced. Greenblatt emphasized the importance of studying the social, political, and economic factors that shaped literary works, as well as the ways in which those works in turn influenced the culture and politics of their time.

New Historicism also seeks to break down the boundaries between high and low culture, and to explore the ways in which literature and culture interact with other forms of discourse and representation, such as science, philosophy, and popular culture.

One of the key principles of New Historicism is the idea that literature and culture are never neutral or objective, but are always implicated in power relations and struggles. It also emphasizes the importance of the reader or interpreter in shaping the meaning of a text, arguing that our own historical and cultural contexts influence the way we understand and interpret literary works. When using this method, we often talk about cultural artifacts as part of the *discourse* of their time period.

New Historicism has been influential in a variety of fields, including literary and cultural studies, history, and anthropology. It has been used to analyze a wide range of literary works, from Shakespeare to contemporary novels, as well as other cultural artifacts such as films and popular music.

**Cultural studies** is an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing literature that emerged in the late 20th century. Unlike traditional literary criticism that focuses solely on the text itself, cultural studies criticism explores the relationship between literature and culture. It considers how literature reflects, influences, and is influenced by the broader cultural, social, political, and historical contexts in which it is produced and consumed.

In cultural studies literary criticism, scholars may examine how literature intersects with issues such as race, gender, class,

sexuality, and power dynamics. The goal is to understand how literature participates in and shapes cultural discourses. This approach emphasizes the importance of considering the cultural and social implications of literary texts, as well as the ways in which literature can be a site of contestation and negotiation.

Key concepts in cultural studies literary criticism include hegemony, representation, identity, and the politics of culture. Scholars in this field often draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives, including postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory, to analyze and interpret literary works in their cultural context. We will explore these approaches to literature in more depth in future parts of the book.

## Learning Objectives

- Understand how formal elements in literary texts create meaning within the context of culture and literary discourse. (CLO 2.1)
- Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation (CLO 2.3)
- Emphasize what the work does and how it does it with respect to form, content, and context (CLO 2.4)
- Understand how context impacts the reading

of a text, and how different contexts can bring about different readings (CLO 4.1)

- Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing how textual interpretation can change given the context from which one reads (CLO 6.2)
- Understand that interpretation is inherently political, and that it reveals assumptions and expectations about value, truth, and the human experience (CLO 7.1)

## Scholarship: An Excerpt from the Introduction to Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969)

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and historian, is widely credited with the ideas about history that led to the development of New Historicism as an approach to literary texts. In this passage, Foucault explains his aims in proposing that history does not consist of stable facts. Understanding Foucault's approach to history is necessary for understanding the New Historicism critical approach to literature.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I should like to begin with a few observations.

- My aim is not to transfer to the field of history, and more particularly to the history of knowledge (*connaissances*), a structuralist method that has proved valuable in other fields

of analysis. My aim is to uncover the principles and consequences of an autochthonous transformation that is taking place in the field of historical knowledge. It may well be that this, transformation, the problems that it raises, the tools that it uses, the concepts that emerge from it, and the results that it obtains are not entirely foreign to what is called structural analysis. But this kind of analysis is not specifically used;

- my aim is most decidedly not to use the categories of cultural totalities (whether world-views, ideal types, the particular spirit of an age) in order to impose on history, despite itself, the forms of structural analysis. The series described, the limits fixed, the comparisons and correlations made are based not on the old philosophies of history, but are intended to question teleologies and totalisations;
- in so far as my aim is to define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme, it is clear that the theory that I am about to outline has a dual relation with the previous studies. It is an attempt to formulate, in general terms (and not without a great deal of rectification and elaboration), the tools that these studies have used or forged for themselves in the course of their work. But, on the other hand, it uses the results already obtained to define a method of analysis purged of all anthropologism. The ground on which it rests is the one that it has itself discovered. The studies of madness and the beginnings of psychology, of illness and the beginnings of a clinical medicine, of the

sciences of life, language, and economics were attempts that were carried out, to some extent, in the dark: but they gradually became clear, not only because little by little their method became more precise, but also because they discovered – in this debate on humanism and anthropology – the point of its historical possibility.

In short, this book, like those that preceded it, does not belong – at least directly, or in the first instance – to the debate on structure (as opposed to genesis, history, development); it belongs to that field in which the questions of the human being, consciousness, origin, and the subject emerge, intersect, mingle, and separate off. But it would probably not be incorrect to say that the problem of structure arose there too.

This work is not an exact description of what can be read in *Madness and Civilisation*, *Naissance de la clinique*, or *The Order of Things*. It is different on a great many points. It also includes a number of corrections and internal criticisms. Generally speaking, *Madness and Civilisation* accorded far too great a place, and a very enigmatic one too, to what I called an 'experiment', thus showing to what extent one was still close to admitting an anonymous and general subject of history; in *Naissance de la clinique*, the frequent recourse to structural analysis threatened to bypass the specificity of the problem presented, and the level proper to archaeology; lastly, in *The Order of Things*, the absence of methodological signposting may have given the impression that my analyses were



being conducted in terms of cultural totality. It is mortifying that I was unable to avoid these dangers: I console myself with the thought that they were intrinsic to the enterprise itself, since, in order to carry out its task, it had first to free itself from these various methods and forms of history; moreover, without the questions that I was asked,' without the difficulties that arose, without the objections that were made, I may never have gained so clear a view of the enterprise to which I am now inextricably linked. Hence the cautious, stumbling manner of this text: at every turn, it stands back, measures up what is before it, gropes towards its limits, stumbles against what it does not mean, and digs pits to mark out its own path. At every turn, it denounces any possible confusion. It rejects its identity, without previously stating: I am neither this nor that. It is not critical, most of the time; it is not a way of saying that everyone else 'is wrong. It is an attempt to define a particular site by the exteriority of its vicinity; rather than trying to reduce others to silence, by claiming that what they say is worthless, I have tried to define this blank space from which I speak, and which is slowly taking shape in a discourse that I still feel to be so precarious and so unsure.

'Aren't you sure of what you're saying? Are you going to change yet again, shift your position according to the questions that are put to you, and say that the objections are not really directed at the place from which you, are speaking? Are you going to declare yet again that you have never been what you have been reproached with being? Are you already preparing the way out

that will enable you in your next book to spring up somewhere else and declare as you're now doing: no, no, I'm not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you?'

'What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing – with a rather shaky hand – a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.'

After reading this brief excerpt from Foucault's approach to history, how do you feel about his assertion that there are no stable facts, that history is essentially like any other text that we can deconstruct? Is there such a thing as "objective" or "true" history? Why or why not? How does this approach compare with what you learned about deconstruction in our previous section?

Scholar Jean Howard has said of the historical/biographical criticism (which we studied in part one) that it depends on three assumptions:

1. "history is knowable";
2. "literature mirrors...or reflects historical reality";
3. "historians and critics can see the facts objectively"

(Howard 18).

Foucault and the New Historicists reject these three assumptions.

## **Cultural Studies: From “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’” by Stuart Hall**

Now let's look at an example of Cultural Studies criticism: Stuart Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular.'" Hall, a Jamaican-born cultural theorist and sociologist, was one of the founders of British Cultural Studies. He explored the process of encoding and decoding that accompanies any interaction readers have with a text. When Hall talks about "periodisation" in the passage below, he is discussing historians' and literary theorists' attempts to classify works through "periods" (e.g., the English Romantic poets; the Bloomsbury Group, etc.). Hall extends this difficulty to the phrase "popular culture," which is often used in cultural studies criticism.

First, I want to say something about periodisations in the study of popular culture. Difficult problems are posed here by periodization—I don't offer it to you simply as a sort of gesture to the historians. Are the major breaks largely descriptive? Do they arise largely from within popular culture itself, or from factors which are outside of but impinge on it? With what other movements and periodisations is "popular culture" most revealingly linked? Then I want to tell you some of the difficulties I have with the term "popular." I have almost as many problems with "popular" as I have with

“culture.” When you put the two terms together the difficulties can be pretty horrendous.

Throughout the long transition into agrarian capitalism and then in the formation and development of industrial capitalism, there is a more or less continuous struggle over the culture of working people, the labouring classes and the poor. This fact must be the starting point for any study, both of the basis for, and of the transformations of, popular culture. The changing balance and relations of social forces throughout that history revealed themselves, time and again, in struggles over the forms of the culture, traditions and ways of life of the popular classes. Capital had a stake in the culture of the popular classes because the constitution of a whole new social order around capital required a more or less continuous, if intermittent, process of re-education, in the broadest sense. And one of the principal sites of resistance to the forms through which this “reformation” of the people was pursued lay in popular tradition. That is why popular culture is linked, for so long, to questions of tradition, of traditional forms of life, and why its “traditionalism” has been so often misinterpreted as a product of a merely conservative impulse, backward-looking and anachronistic. Struggle and resistance—but also, of course, appropriation and expropriation. Time and again, what we are really looking at is the active destruction of particular ways of life, and their transformation into something new. “Cultural change” is a polite euphemism for the process by which some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the centre of popular life, actively marginalised. Rather than simply “falling into disuse” through the Long March to modernization, things are actively pushed aside, so that something else can take their place. The magistrate and

the evangelical police have, or ought to have, a more “honoured” place in the history of popular culture than they have usually been accorded. Even more important than ban and proscription is that subtle and slippery customer—“reform” (with all the positive and unambiguous overtones it carries today). One way or another, “the people” are frequently the object of “reform”: often, for their own good, of course—in their “best interest.” We understand struggle and resistance, nowadays, rather better than we do reform and transformation. Yet “transformations” are at the heart of the study of popular culture. I mean the active work on existing traditions and activities, their active reworking, so that they come out a different way: they appear to “persist”—yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to “the others” and to their conditions of life. Transformation is the key to the long and protracted process of the “moralization” of the labouring classes, and the “demoralization” of the poor, and the “re-education” of the people. Popular culture is neither, in a “pure” sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked.

In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.

Now that you’ve read examples of scholarship from these two approaches, what similarities and differences do you see? Despite significant overlaps—both approaches consider power structures and view texts as artifacts, for example—Cultural

Studies tends to have a broader scope, incorporating insights from various cultural disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. New Historicism focuses more specifically on the interplay between literature and history. Additionally, Cultural Studies may engage more directly with contemporary cultural and political issues, while New Historicism tends to focus on historical periods and their relevance to understanding literature.

## How to Use New Historicism and Cultural Studies as Critical Approaches

When using a New Historicism or cultural studies approach to analyze a literary text, you should consider the connections between the text and its historical context. With cultural studies, you will also consider how the text influenced and was influenced by popular culture, and how the text's reception changed over time. You can do this in a variety of ways. Here are a few approaches you might consider. Some of them such as author background, reader response, and identifying power dynamics will feel familiar to you from previous chapters.

1. **Research the Historical Context:** Investigate the time period in which the literary work was written. Explore political events, social structures, economic conditions, and cultural movements.
2. **Author's Background:** Examine the life and background of the author. Consider their personal experiences, beliefs, and the historical events that may have influenced them.
3. **Identify Power Dynamics:** Analyze power relationships within the text and in the historical context. Consider issues of class, gender, race, and other forms of social

hierarchy.

4. **Interdisciplinary Approach:** Draw on insights from various disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, and political science to enrich your understanding of the historical and cultural context.
5. **Cultural Artifacts:** Treat the literary work as a cultural artifact. Identify elements within the text that reflect or respond to the cultural values, norms, and anxieties of the time.
6. **Dialogues with Other Texts:** Explore how the literary work engages with other texts, both literary and non-literary. Look for intertextual references and consider how the work contributes to broader cultural conversations (the discourse Foucault talks about).
7. **Language and Literary Techniques:** Analyze the language, narrative structure, and formal elements of the text. Consider how these literary techniques contribute to the overall meaning and how they may be influenced by or respond to historical factors.
8. **Ideological Critique:** Investigate the ideologies present in the text and how they align with or challenge the dominant ideologies of the historical period. Consider the ways in which literature participates in ideological struggles. We will explore more specific examples of how to do this when we focus on Marxism and Postcolonial Studies in our next section.
9. **Social and Cultural Constructs:** Examine how social and cultural constructs are represented in the text. This includes exploring representations of identity, social norms, and cultural practices.
10. **Historical Events and Allusions:** Identify direct or indirect references to historical events within the text. Consider how the events are portrayed and what commentary they offer on the historical moment.
11. **Historical Change and Continuity:** Assess how the text

reflects or responds to processes of historical change and continuity. Consider whether the text aligns with or challenges prevailing attitudes and structures.

12. **Reader Response:** Reflect on how the historical context might shape the way readers interpret and respond to the text. Consider how the meaning of the text may evolve across different historical and cultural contexts.

You do not need to consider every aspect of the text mentioned above to write an effective New Historicism analysis. You can focus on one or a few of these elements in your approach to the text.

As noted above, a cultural studies critical approach is similar to New Historicism but focuses more on the text as it is received in a particular culture, with more emphasis on intersectionality. A cultural studies approach may consider a variety of artifacts in addition to literary texts (such as film and other media) for analysis. A cultural studies approach might also consider how cultural influences, receptions, and attitudes have changed over time.

Let's look at how do do these types of criticism by applying New Historicism to a text.

## Applying New Historicism Techniques to Literature

As with our other critical approaches, we will start with a close reading of the poem below (we'll do this together in class or as part of the recorded lecture for this chapter). After you complete your close reading of the poem and find evidence from the text, you'll need to look outside the text for additional information to place the poem in its context. I have provided some additional resources to demonstrate how you might do



this. Looking at the text within its context will help you to formulate a thesis statement that makes an argument about the text, using New Historicism as your critical method.

## “Lament for Dark Peoples”

BY LANGSTON HUGHES (1926)

I was a red man one time,  
But the white men came.  
I was a black man, too,  
But the white men came.

They drove me out of the forest.  
They took me away from the jungles.  
I lost my trees.  
I lost my silver moons.

Now they’ve caged me  
In the circus of civilization.  
Now I herd with the many—  
Caged in the circus of civilization.

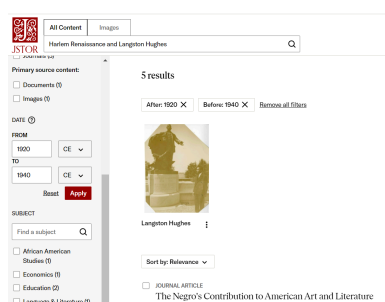
The first thing we need to know is more about Langston Hughes as a poet. Who was he? When did he write? What was the cultural context for his writing? We can go to Wikipedia as a starting point for our research, but we should not cite Wikipedia. Instead, we will want to find higher-quality literary scholarship to use in our analysis.

The open source article “Langston Hughes’s Poetic Vision of the American Dream: A Complex and Creative Encoded

Language” by Christine Dualé informs us that “Hughes gained his reputation as a “jazz poet” during the jazz era or Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s” (Dualé 1). Dualé quotes a study of Black poets during the Harlem Renaissance that provides some context for this poem: “Many black intellectuals were disquieted by the white vogue for blackness. They recognized how frivolous and temporal it was, and the extent to which their culture was being admired for all the ‘primitive’ qualities from which they wished to be distanced” (Dualé quoting Archer Straw).

This quote helps us to understand lines 9-12 of the poem, where Hughes describes the “circus of civilization” that he felt under the gaze of this “white vogue for blackness.”

In considering the question of social constructs and power dynamics during this period, we need to know more about the Harlem Renaissance, preferably looking for contemporary sources that describe this period. JSTOR is a good database for this type of research. I limit my search by year to get five results, and I choose an article from Alain Locke (in part, because I already know enough about the Harlem Renaissance to know that Locke was an important part of it—it’s totally acceptable to use your own existing knowledge of the historical context, if you have it, to guide your research!).



*Search limiters by date in JSTOR can be helpful for locating scholarship contemporary to the time the text was written.*

When I read “The Negro’s Contribution to American Art and Literature,” written by Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke in 1928, I quickly find the prevailing social construct that the dominant intellectual culture at the time (white American men) had formed about African American writers during the

period when this poem was written. I have quoted from the first page of the article below:

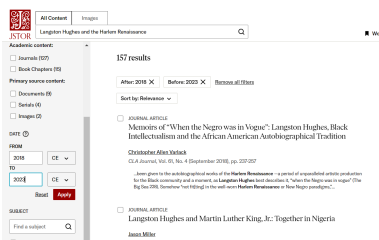
THERE are two distinctive elements in the cultural background of the American Negro: one, his primitive tropical heritage, however vague and clouded over that may be, and second, the specific character of the Negro group experience in America both with respect to group history and with regard to unique environing social conditions. As an easily discriminable minority, these conditions are almost inescapable for all sections of the Negro population, and function, therefore, to intensify emotionally and intellectually group feelings, group reactions, group traditions. Such an accumulating body of collective experience inevitably matures into a group culture which just as inevitably finds some channels of unique expression, and this has been and will be the basis of the Negro's characteristic expression of himself in American life. In fact, as it matures to conscious control and intelligent use, what has been the Negro's social handicap and class liability will very likely become his positive group capital and cultural asset. Certainly whatever the Negro has produced thus far of distinctive worth and originality has been derived in the main from this source, with the equipment from the general stock of American culture acting at times merely as the precipitating agent; at others, as the working tools of this creative expression (Locke 234).

In reading this article, it's important to note that the author, Alain Locke, is a noted African American scholar and writer and the first African American to win a prestigious Rhodes scholarship. He is widely considered to be one of the principal architects of the Harlem Renaissance. What does this passage tell us about the social constructs and contemporary views of African Americans in the late 1920s, when Langston Hughes

wrote “Lament for Dark Peoples”? What important historical context seems to be “missing” or glossed over from this cultural description of African Americans in the 1920s? Hint: It’s only 60 years since President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, and yet we see no explicit mention of slavery here.

Now to consider how history and context changes, I might also look for a contemporary appraisal of Langston Hughes’s work in the context of the Harlem Renaissance.

Again, I do a JSTOR search, limiting to articles from 2018 through 2023. I get 157 results using the same search terms. Clearly, Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance are playing a prominent role in our contemporary scholarly discourse, especially in the fields of literature, history, and cultural studies. In fact, there’s even a journal called *The Langston Hughes Review*! I choose an article from this journal entitled “Guest Editor’s Introduction: Remembering Langston Hughes: His Art, Life, and Legacy Fifty Years Later” by Wallace Best, Professor of Religion and African American Studies at Princeton University.



In this search, when I limit the date to 2018-2023, I get 157 results.

In this article, I get some corroboration for what my search results have already told me: “Langston Hughes, one of the principal writers of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, is having a renaissance all his own” (Best 1).

Best goes on to demonstrate how Langston Hughes’s role in our culture has shifted since his death:

“There is good reason for all this attention. Arguably one of the most significant writers in United States history, Hughes has left an indelible mark, culturally and

politically, on American society. Hailed in his lifetime mainly as the “Poet Laureate of the African American community,” he is now generally embraced as one of the most important poets speaking to, and on behalf of, all Americans. Since his death in May 1967, his writing, particularly his poetry, has been invoked to articulate both our loftiest hopes and our deepest fears as a nation. Seldom has there been a national crisis or an important political event in the United States over the last half-century in which his work has not been recounted. Speakers from across the social, ideological, and political spectrum, from Tim Kaine, Rick Santorum, and Rick Perry to Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama have cited Hughes’s powerful compositions. His poetry has helped to shape our country’s thinking about itself, our often-troubled past, and our continuing hope for a brighter, more enlightened future.”

With these three external sources and the original poem, I can now begin to think about the kind of thesis statement I want to write.

**Example of a New Historicism thesis statement:**

In one of his earlier poems, “Lament for Dark Peoples,” African American poet Langston Hughes makes a powerful argument against the “circus of [white] civilization (line 12), demonstrating how the cultural norms toward marginalized peoples in place during the early twentieth century damaged all Americans.

I would then use the evidence from the poem as one cultural

artifact, including the additional sources I found to provide more context for when the poem was written, the social constructs and power dynamics in place at that time, and the shifts in culture that have now made Langston Hughes a poet for “all Americans” (Best 1).

With New Historicism, because we are considering the context, we must cite some outside sources in addition to the text itself. Here are the sources I cited in this section:

### **Works Cited**

Best, Wallace. “Guest Editor’s Introduction: Remembering Langston Hughes: His Art, Life, and Legacy Fifty Years Later.” *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–5. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5325/langhughrevi.25.1.0001>. Accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

Dualé, Christine. “Langston Hughes’s Poetic Vision of the American Dream: A Complex and Creative Encoded Language.” *Angles. New Perspectives on the Anglophone World* 7 (2018). <https://journals.openedition.org/angles/920>. Accessed 3 Oct. 2023.

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One additional note: depending on your approach, it would also be appropriate to borrow research techniques from historians for a New Historicism analysis. This might involve working with archive primary source documents. One example of this type of document that I found in my research on the Harlem Renaissance is this one from the U.S. Library of Congress entitled “The Whites Invade Harlem.”

As noted above, a cultural studies approach would be similar

to a New Historicism approach. However, if I were using cultural studies, I might want to focus on the difference between the text's critical reception when it was published (how it affected and was affected by the discourse in the 1920s) and the text's critical reception today, focusing on the explosion of academic interest on Langston Hughes's work in since 2018. I would then look at the particular aspects of culture, such as the election of America's first Black president and the backlash this created in popular culture, as well as the focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in academia and how this was reflected in popular culture. For example, I could consider how twenty-first century scholarship focusing on Langston Hughes is one example of a larger desire for inclusion and representation of marginalized groups in literature, what we sometimes refer to as "exploding the canon" (Renza 257).

## Limitations of New Historicism and Cultural Studies Criticism

While New Historicism offers valuable insights into the interconnectedness of literature and historical context, it also has its limitations. Here are some potential drawbacks:

1. **Relativism:** New Historicism can sometimes be accused of cultural relativism, as it emphasizes understanding a text within its specific historical context. This might lead to a reluctance to make broader judgments about the quality or significance of a work across different times and cultures.
2. **Overemphasis on Power Relations:** Critics argue that New Historicism can place an excessive focus on power dynamics and political aspects, potentially neglecting other important elements of literary analysis, such as

aesthetics or individual authorial intentions.

3. **Determinism:** There's a risk of determinism in assuming that a text is entirely shaped by its historical context. This approach may downplay the agency of individual authors and the role of artistic creativity in shaping literature.
4. **Selective Use of History:** Scholars employing New Historicism may selectively use historical evidence to support their interpretations, potentially overlooking contradictory historical data or alternative perspectives that challenge their readings (don't do this!)
5. **Overlooking Textual Autonomy/Author Authority:** Critics argue that New Historicism sometimes neglects the autonomy of literary texts, treating them primarily as reflections of historical conditions rather than as creative and independent entities with their own internal dynamics.
6. **Tendency for Presentism:** There's a risk of imposing contemporary values and perspectives onto historical texts, leading to anachronistic interpretations that may not accurately reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the time in which the work was created (note how I initially looked for scholarship *from the time period of the text* I was analyzing above).

These limitations do not mean we shouldn't use New Historicism; rather, they suggest areas where a more balanced and comprehensive approach to literary analysis may be necessary.

Similarly, cultural studies might place an overwhelming emphasis on cultural factors, sometimes neglecting economic or political considerations that could also shape social dynamics. The relativist stance of cultural studies may hinder critical evaluation and potentially overlook harmful practices or ideologies.



# New Historicism and Cultural Criticism Scholars

## New Historicism

- Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French philosopher who viewed history as a text that could be deconstructed. Foucault's concept of "the discourse" is essential to both New Historicism and Cultural Studies criticism.
- Stephen Greenblatt (b. 1943) is the American Shakespeare scholar who coined the term "New Historicism."

## Cultural Studies

- Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was a Jamaican-born British philosopher and cultural theorist whose ideas were influential to the development of cultural studies as a field.
- Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a German philosopher and thinker whose ideas about media were foundational to cultural studies.
- Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian

philosopher and critic who focused on the importance of context over text in approaches to literary works.

- Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a French philosopher whose 1967 essay “L’Morte de Auteur” critiqued traditional biographical approaches to literary criticism.

## Further Reading

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# 26. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Model Essay

For each model AI essay in this book, I've used the same poem: John Donne's "The Canonization." I chose this poem because I think it's brilliant, and also tough. It's a poem I am still wrestling with, so I wanted to see how generative artificial intelligence could help me to improve my understanding of and approach to the text.

Read through this poem first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, outside sources that explain more about the poem's context. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

## Model AI Essay: New Historicism

### “The Canonization of Love: John Donne’s Poetic Confluence of Biography and 17th Century England”

In John Donne’s poem “The Canonization,” a New Historicist approach unveils a rich interplay between the poet’s personal experiences and the cultural milieu of 17th century England. The poem, ostensibly a defense of love against societal norms, delves into the complexities of Donne’s life and the broader socio-political context, showcasing how love is not only a personal matter but also a reflection of the tumultuous times in which he lived.

Donne, a metaphysical poet, lived in a period marked by political upheavals, religious conflicts, and shifting cultural paradigms. The opening lines of the poem, “For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,” set the tone for a rebellious assertion of personal autonomy in the face of external judgment. This resonates with Donne’s own life, as he faced opposition to his romantic entanglements, including a clandestine marriage that led to his dismissal from governmental positions.

The second stanza, questioning the impact of the

speaker's love, echoes the uncertainties of Donne's socio-political environment. The reference to "merchant's ships" and "tears" suggests a world deeply affected by economic and emotional turmoil—a sentiment that mirrors the economic struggles and anxieties of the 17th century.

The third stanza introduces the idea of love as a unifying force that transcends societal judgments. The image of the couple as "tapers" dying at their own cost embodies the sacrifice and intensity of love, challenging conventional expectations. Donne's exploration of the metaphorical phoenix further adds a layer of complexity, symbolizing renewal and transcendence amid challenges.

The concluding stanza shifts towards the future, contemplating the legacy of the lovers. The notion of being "canonized for Love" carries dual meanings—both a spiritual consecration and a literary recognition. This aligns with Donne's own ambition for poetic immortality and societal acknowledgment despite the unconventional nature of his relationships.

In conclusion, "The Canonization" is not merely a personal expression of love but a reflection of the poet's defiance against societal norms and the broader historical context of 17th century England. Donne, through his nuanced exploration of love, invites readers to consider the intersections of personal experience and cultural forces, demonstrating how literature serves as a site for negotiating individual identity within the larger historical narrative.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/fc8d1049-390f-448f-b1d4-ae52e1206e82>

Either ChatGPT is getting better at these essays, or I am getting better at prompting it! More likely, it's some combination of both. Either way, this is interesting information about these tools and how they can assist in literary analysis. Here's the prompt I used to generate the essay above:

You are a student in an introduction to literary analysis class. Write a short essay on John Donne's "The Canonization" using a new historicism approach to the text. Emphasize both the biographical details of Donne's life that are reflected in the poem and the cultural context (17th century England) for this poem. Make sure you include a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph that makes an argument about the poem using new historicism as your critical method. Also include a title for your essay that reflects the contents of your paper. Here is the text of the poem (copied and pasted "The Canonization").

Read through the same essay with my highlighted annotations below. I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice new historicism.

## Annotations to "The Canonization of Love: John Donne's Poetic Confluence of Biography and 17th Century England"

In John Donne's poem "The Canonization," a **New Historicist**

approach unveils a rich interplay between the **poet's personal experiences** and the **cultural milieu** of 17th century England. The poem, ostensibly a defense of love against **societal norms**, delves into the complexities of Donne's **life** and the broader **socio-political context**, showcasing how love is not only a personal matter but also a **reflection** of the tumultuous **times in which he lived**. This is a decent thesis statement. The introduction of the essay is a bit sparse though. ChatGPT doesn't really shine when it comes to providing sources yet; it's still prone to hallucination. As we learned in the previous chapter, it's really important to consider the context with New Historicism, and for this, we will need some research, both into the author's personal biography and into the "cultural milieu" that the essay talks about. What does this mean? Providing a bit more background in the introduction about 17th century England would be a good approach to take. One important detail to include is the exact year the poem was published (1633) or if this is not known, the general timeframe or period.

Donne, a metaphysical poet, lived in a **period** marked by **political upheavals, religious conflicts, and shifting cultural paradigms**. The opening lines of the poem, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," set the tone for a rebellious assertion of personal autonomy in the face of external judgment. This resonates with Donne's own life, as he faced opposition to his romantic entanglements, including a clandestine marriage that led to his dismissal from governmental positions. This paragraph provides a biographical sketch of the poet using the terminology (bolded) we would expect to see in a New Historicist approach. However, you should not take any historical "facts" from generative AI at face value. You'll need to do some outside research to see if this biography is accurate. A quick check of Wikipedia confirms the broad outlines of what is written here, but the details are actually much more interesting and help us to better appreciate the cultural constructs Donne is railing against in



this poem. Here's a quote from the section on Donne's marriage to Anne Moore: "During the next four years, Donne fell in love with Egerton's niece Anne More. They were secretly married just before Christmas in 1601, against the wishes of both Egerton and Anne's father George More, who was Lieutenant of the Tower.<sup>[12]</sup> Upon discovery, this wedding ruined Donne's career, getting him dismissed and put in Fleet Prison, along with the Church of England priest Samuel Brooke, who married them,<sup>[13]</sup> and his brother Christopher, who stood in, in the absence of George More, to give Anne away. Donne was released shortly thereafter when the marriage was proved to be valid, and he soon secured the release of the other two." It's better to be more specific and concrete when considering how the author's biography influences or provides context for the poem.

The second stanza, questioning the impact of the speaker's love, echoes the **uncertainties** of Donne's **socio-political environment**. The reference to "merchant's ships" and "tears" suggests a world deeply affected by **economic** and emotional turmoil—a sentiment that mirrors the economic struggles and anxieties of the **17th century**. Again, we would want more specific detail and a source to strengthen this paragraph, using the poem as just one cultural artifact from the 17th century world. What are some historical examples?

The third stanza introduces the idea of love as a unifying force that transcends **societal judgments**. The image of the couple as "tapers" dying at their own cost embodies the sacrifice and intensity of love, challenging **conventional expectations**. Donne's exploration of the metaphorical phoenix further adds a layer of complexity, symbolizing renewal and transcendence amid challenges. This paragraph is interesting within a New Historicism approach because it almost feels more like New Criticism to me. If I were looking at symbols like the tapers or the phoenix in the poem, I would explain why

these images would resonate with readers of this time period. Again, this would require some outside research.

The concluding stanza shifts towards the future, contemplating the legacy of the lovers. The notion of being “canonized for Love” carries dual meanings—both a spiritual consecration and a **literary recognition**. This aligns with Donne’s own ambition for poetic immortality and **societal acknowledgment** despite the unconventional nature of his relationships. At this point, I would expect to see much more information about what a canonization is and why this image is particularly defiant in the context of this poem. I would want to learn more about Donne’s rejection of Catholicism and consider how the audience might have received his comparison of a forbidden marriage to the canonization process that makes people religious saints, especially in the context of Donne’s own religious beliefs and the contemporary religious milieu (this was during the big Catholic/Protestant upheaval that cannot be ignored as the context for this poem).

In conclusion, “The Canonization” is not merely a personal expression of love but a reflection of the poet’s **defiance against societal norms and the broader historical context of 17th century England**. Donne, through his nuanced exploration of love, invites readers to consider the intersections of personal experience and cultural forces, demonstrating how **literature serves as a site for negotiating individual identity within the larger historical narrative**. I really like that last line. It sounds like something straight out of Foucault (which means I have to scratch my head and think about it). But this is indeed one of the functions of literature within a New Historicism approach (although some critics would argue somewhat deterministically that an author’s individual identity is impossible—that we are all products of our culture and inextricably shaped by it).

## You Try It!

Choose one of your favorite poems. Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that applies New Historicism or Cultural Studies criticism to the poem you chose. Then analyze the AI-generated essay. Is the theory correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses New Historicism or Cultural Studies and the text you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

## 27. Student Example Essay: New Historicism

The following student essay example of New Historicism is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses Lorrie Moore's short story, "Terrific Mother."

# When Women Were Never Enough: A New Historical Perspective on Lorrie Moore's "Terrific Mother"

*by Tania Agurto*

Motherhood has been a source of discord in recent decades for being a concept that is exclusively associated with women, and it turns out to be for some people or societies a kind of meter that helps to pigeonhole women or rank them depending on whether they have decided or managed to be mothers. Lorrie Moore's "Terrific Mother" presents us this reality through Adrienne, a woman in her mid-thirties, single, childless, which due to her personal circumstances receives compliments such as, "You would make a terrific mother" (Moore 3). Adrienne attends a gathering of friends and by accident, her friend's baby she holds falls along with her when the picnic bench toppled on her, and sadly the baby dies, which leads her to make decisions such as seclusion for months and later marriage, as an escape route from her pain and guilt. This is how Adrienne, despite being a woman who breaks with the socially established canons, cannot get out of the vicious circle established for women in those years.

Through the lens of New Historical Criticism, we can appreciate the external influences that shape Moore's work and at the same time understand the reality experienced by women in the late 1990s. At the end of the nineties the world was already seeing a change concerning the established social model; this could be appreciated in the delay in the age of marriage and childbirth due to prioritizing the pursuit of a professional career, the joining of women to the workforce or simply seeking independence without the need for marriage. These changes were reflected in the increase in the average age of women at the time of marriage, which had risen from 20 – 22 years in the early nineties to 25 years at the end of 1997

(Yarrow). This is how the author manages to bring to the fore the important social events that were happening worldwide through Adrienne, a single and independent woman. Regarding that, Karen Weekes declares that “protagonists in Moore’s short stories cycles are constantly exploring and pushing against the social boundaries that they and others have established” (3).

A characteristic of the social change of the nineties is the recognition and the requirement of women as a multifaceted beings; however, in *Text and Contexts* Steven Lynn acknowledges that having equal opportunities is good, but it is not fair when the woman is responsible for taking those opportunities while taking care of everything else (223). Weekes also refers to this and points out that “females’ identities are continually formed and reformed, allowing women to fluctuate between stages of development in response to the sociological demands of relationships and maternal nurturing.” However, we can see to this day that, even though things have become the same through the years, the demand has always been greater for women or the reward for the opportunity has been uneven.

Although we know that the historical context will shape the result whatever the work, the author’s background will also do it. Steven Lynn points out “We can hardly understand one person’s life without some sense of the time and place in which he or she lived, and we can hardly understand human history without trying to think about the individual humans who made it” (148). As part of Moore’s life story, she comments that as a child she was very thin and that made her feel fearful of her environment; she even shared that she was afraid to walk over the grates. Once she became an adult that was not an exception since Moore, like Adrienne, broke with the established pattern, but she continued with his fearful personality. Don Lee comments that “her expectations for herself were modest. Entering St. Lawrence, she hadn’t been

exactly bursting with ambition.” Later Moore adds, “ I think I probably went to college to fall in love” (“About Lorrie Moore”). The influence of her environment and pre-established social patterns have likely helped her to feel that way concerning her personal abilities and expectations. How did this fearful girl become the successful writer of “Terrific Mother”? It is probably her personality that has helped in a great way since this influences her way of writing which is detailed as follows: “Many of her stories are fairly traditional in structure, but there is always that quickness of movement, that slightly skewed narrative perspective that keeps you alert and a little uneasy—she could pull something anytime, and you don’t want to miss it” (Unlikely Stories). Moore herself catalogs her life as “conventional” and that is what makes her strangely close in her way of writing.

However, despite not feeling too trained or not being completely sure of the path she wanted to follow professionally, she broke all standards and has even been highlighted as one of the best authors of American short stories. In an article that talks about the rebirth of American short stories Vince Passaro declares, “When volumes like those from Lorrie Moore ...a new kind of work stepped out onto the American literary landscape, more psychologically rich and confrontational than that of the minimalists” (“Unlikely Stones”).

The time period in which the story was written tells us a lot about important social changes concerning the visualization of women as defiant beings of the unilaterally established rules. In the late 1990s, it was the Post Feminist movement that was gaining momentum; however, it seems that Adrienne remains to live only First Wave Feminism, since it only leaves the parameter of breaking the scheme, but does not advance further.

The foregoing is explained in her decision to marry Martin, who offers her the option to accompany him to his academic retreat in northern Italy, then in this way “she could be a

spouse" (Moore 4). The emotional situation that Adrienne experiences does not allow her to see further and she thinks that this decision will allow her to resume her life; to try to live again because she "is a bushwoman now" (Moore 4). As a consequence of this decision, Adrienne becomes emotionally subjugated to Martin, which makes her dependent on him emotionally and does not help her with her previous mental-emotional situation.

"Terrific Mother" is a complex story in which Lorrie Moore takes us along surprising paths and we can see how the historical context influences the development of this work; however, it should be mentioned that Moore's background also affects the setting of the stage in this story. Just as she admits to leading a very conventional life, she also leads Adrienne to try to follow the same path, because "Marriage it's an institution", which means that at this time in a historical-social environment, surpassed currents of equality, equity, and liberation.

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# 28. Practicing New Historicism and Cultural Studies

For our New Historicism and cultural studies theoretical response, we will take a slightly different approach compared with previous chapters. Everyone will read an excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald and review four film trailers and reviews below. You'll then choose between two options to complete your theoretical response. Note that in both cases, your theoretical response will be slightly longer (750-1000 words) this week because you'll need to integrate multiple sources.

## Option One: New Historicism

Using the artifacts listed below, apply the techniques of New Historicism to explore how these texts exist and interact within their contexts. Here are the four required artifacts:

- Excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)
- "Lament for Dark Peoples" by Langston Hughes (1926)
- The 1926 film trailer for *The Great Gatsby* (below)
- The 1926 *New York Times* film review for *The Great Gatsby* (note: you will need to use your free student account to access this article).

You may also want to do some brief research about the historical conditions of 1925-1926 in the United States. Focus on the artifacts as evidence of their historical contexts. Your

response should be 750-1000 words and include a brief thesis statement that reflects your critical approach.

Here are some questions to consider as you write your response:

1. What do we need to know about F. Scott Fitzgerald to understand *The Great Gatsby* as a cultural artifact? What do we need to know about Langston Hughes? And how does purely biographical criticism differ from a New Historicism approach?
2. What are some of the main historical events that occurred in the period when the book, poem, and film were created? Do you see these historical events reflected in these three artifacts?
3. How might this historical context shape the creation of these three cultural artifacts? How does the 1926 film review affect your understanding of this context?
4. Do we see congruity in messaging around social norms in these three artifacts? What are those social norms? Are there any missing or excluded voices in these artifacts? If so, why?
5. What other artifacts might you consider if you wanted to learn more or confirm your theories about the historical context for these three artifacts? For example, what kinds of advertisements would you expect to see in this issue of the *New York Times*?
6. How do we view these artifacts and their societal/cultural norms from our modern perspective? In other words, have our cultural/societal norms remained stable in the 60 years since these cultural artifacts were published? If not, what significant changes have occurred?

## Option Two: Cultural Studies

Film and media studies are common cultural studies approaches. For this option, you'll have more choice over your artifacts, and you'll be considering the text and the film artifacts as examples of the cultures that produced them. You'll need to use the following artifact:

- Excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

Then choose any two film trailers and reviews from the 1949, 1974, and 2013 versions linked below.

In addition to considering the historical and cultural context of the novel, you should also do some brief historical research about the two film years that you choose. Focus on the artifacts as evidence of the culture that produced and received them, and consider how and why that reception has changed over time. Your response should be 750-1000 words and include a brief thesis statement that reflects your critical approach.

Here are some questions to consider as you write your response:

1. What do we need to know about F. Scott Fitzgerald to understand *The Great Gatsby* as a cultural artifact? What did “popular culture” look like in the mid 1920s in the United States?
2. What cultural norms do you see reflected in the two film adaptations you chose? How do the cultural norms when these movies were made compare with the cultural norms in the novel excerpt?
3. How do the film reviews affect your understanding of this cultural context?
4. How have social norms and the messaging around them changed in these three artifacts? What are those social norms? Are there any missing or excluded voices in these

artifacts? If so, why?

5. What other artifacts might you consider if you wanted to learn more or confirm your theories about societal and cultural norms in these three artifacts? For example, what kinds of advertisements would you expect to see in this issue of the *New York Times*?
6. How do we view these artifacts and their societal/cultural norms from our modern perspective? Have our views changed since these cultural artifacts were published? (This may be an especially interesting question if you choose the 2013 version).

Post your short essay (using *either* option one or option two) to the New Historicism/Cultural Studies Theoretical Response discussion board. Please include the option you have chosen in your post title. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

## Excerpt from “The Great Gatsby” (1925)

*by F. Scott Fitzgerald*

I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby's house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited—they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island, and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door. Once there they were introduced by somebody who knew Gatsby, and after that they conducted themselves according to the rules of behaviour associated with an amusement park. Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission.

I had been actually invited. A chauffeur in a uniform of robin's-egg blue crossed my lawn early that Saturday morning with a surprisingly formal note from his employer: the honour would be entirely Gatsby's, it said, if I would attend his "little party" that night. He had seen me several times, and had intended to call on me long before, but a peculiar combination of circumstances had prevented it—signed Jay Gatsby, in a majestic hand.

Dressed up in white flannels I went over to his lawn a little after seven, and wandered around rather ill at ease among swirls and eddies of people I didn't know—though here and there was a face I had noticed on the commuting train. I was immediately struck by the number of young Englishmen dotted about; all well dressed, all looking a little hungry, and all talking in low, earnest voices to solid and prosperous Americans. I was sure that they were selling something: bonds or insurance or automobiles. They were at least agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key.

As soon as I arrived I made an attempt to find my host, but the two or three people of whom I asked his whereabouts stared at me in such an amazed way, and denied so vehemently any knowledge of his movements, that I slunk off in the direction of the cocktail table—the only place in the garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone.

I was on my way to get roaring drunk from sheer embarrassment when Jordan Baker came out of the house and stood at the head of the marble steps, leaning a little backward and looking with contemptuous interest down into the garden.

Welcome or not, I found it necessary to attach myself

to someone before I should begin to address cordial remarks to the passersby.

"Hello!" I roared, advancing toward her. My voice seemed unnaturally loud across the garden.

"I thought you might be here," she responded absently as I came up. "I remembered you lived next door to—"

She held my hand impersonally, as a promise that she'd take care of me in a minute, and gave ear to two girls in twin yellow dresses, who stopped at the foot of the steps.

"Hello!" they cried together. "Sorry you didn't win."

That was for the golf tournament. She had lost in the finals the week before.

"You don't know who we are," said one of the girls in yellow, "but we met you here about a month ago."

"You've dyed your hair since then," remarked Jordan, and I started, but the girls had moved casually on and her remark was addressed to the premature moon, produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer's basket. With Jordan's slender golden arm resting in mine, we descended the steps and sauntered about the garden. A tray of cocktails floated at us through the twilight, and we sat down at a table with the two girls in yellow and three men, each one introduced to us as Mr. Mumble.

"Do you come to these parties often?" inquired Jordan of the girl beside her.

"The last one was the one I met you at," answered the girl, in an alert confident voice. She turned to her companion: "Wasn't it for you, Lucille?"

It was for Lucille, too.

"I like to come," Lucille said. "I never care what I do, so I always have a good time. When I was here last I tore my gown on a chair, and he asked me my name and

address—inside of a week I got a package from Croirier's with a new evening gown in it."

"Did you keep it?" asked Jordan.

"Sure I did. I was going to wear it tonight, but it was too big in the bust and had to be altered. It was gas blue with lavender beads. Two hundred and sixty-five dollars."

"There's something funny about a fellow that'll do a thing like that," said the other girl eagerly. "He doesn't want any trouble with *anybody*."

"Who doesn't?" I inquired.

"Gatsby. Somebody told me—"

The two girls and Jordan leaned together confidentially.

"Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once."

A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly.

"I don't think it's so much *that*," argued Lucille sceptically; "It's more that he was a German spy during the war."

One of the men nodded in confirmation.

"I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany," he assured us positively.

"Oh, no," said the first girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war." As our credulity switched back to her she leaned forward with enthusiasm. "You look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man."

She narrowed her eyes and shivered. Lucille shivered. We all turned and looked around for Gatsby. It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world.



The first supper—there would be another one after midnight—was now being served, and Jordan invited me to join her own party, who were spread around a table on the other side of the garden. There were three married couples and Jordan's escort, a persistent undergraduate given to violent innuendo, and obviously under the impression that sooner or later Jordan was going to yield him up her person to a greater or lesser degree. Instead of rambling, this party had preserved a dignified homogeneity, and assumed to itself the function of representing the staid nobility of the countryside—East Egg condescending to West Egg and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gaiety.

"Let's get out," whispered Jordan, after a somehow wasteful and inappropriate half-hour; "this is much too polite for me."

We got up, and she explained that we were going to find the host: I had never met him, she said, and it was making me uneasy. The undergraduate nodded in a cynical, melancholy way.

The bar, where we glanced first, was crowded, but Gatsby was not there. She couldn't find him from the top of the steps, and he wasn't on the veranda. On a chance we tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas.

A stout, middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles, was sitting somewhat drunk on the edge of a great table, staring with unsteady concentration at the shelves of books. As we entered he wheeled excitedly around and examined Jordan from head to foot.

"What do you think?" he demanded impetuously.

"About what?"

He waved his hand toward the bookshelves.

"About that. As a matter of fact you needn't bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They're real."

"The books?"

He nodded.

"Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely real. Pages and—Here! Lemme show you."

Taking our scepticism for granted, he rushed to the bookcases and returned with Volume One of the *Stoddard Lectures*.

"See!" he cried triumphantly. "It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too—didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?"

He snatched the book from me and replaced it hastily on its shelf, muttering that if one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse.

"Who brought you?" he demanded. "Or did you just come? I was brought. Most people were brought."

Jordan looked at him alertly, cheerfully, without answering.

"I was brought by a woman named Roosevelt," he continued. "Mrs. Claud Roosevelt. Do you know her? I met her somewhere last night. I've been drunk for about a week now, and I thought it might sober me up to sit in a library."

"Has it?"

"A little bit, I think. I can't tell yet. I've only been here an hour. Did I tell you about the books? They're real. They're—"

"You told us."

We shook hands with him gravely and went back outdoors.

There was dancing now on the canvas in the garden; old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably, and keeping in the corners—and a great number of single girls dancing individually or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo or the traps. By midnight the hilarity had increased. A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian, and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz, and between the numbers people were doing “stunts” all over the garden, while happy, vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky. A pair of stage twins, who turned out to be the girls in yellow, did a baby act in costume, and champagne was served in glasses bigger than finger-bowls. The moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjos on the lawn.

I was still with Jordan Baker. We were sitting at a table with a man of about my age and a rowdy little girl, who gave way upon the slightest provocation to uncontrollable laughter. I was enjoying myself now. I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound.

At a lull in the entertainment the man looked at me and smiled.

“Your face is familiar,” he said politely. “Weren’t you in the First Division during the war?”

“Why yes. I was in the Twenty-eighth Infantry.”

“I was in the Sixteenth until June nineteen-eighteen. I knew I’d seen you somewhere before.”

We talked for a moment about some wet, grey little villages in France. Evidently he lived in this vicinity, for he told me that he had just bought a hydroplane, and was going to try it out in the morning.

"Want to go with me, old sport? Just near the shore along the Sound."

"What time?"

"Any time that suits you best."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask his name when Jordan looked around and smiled.

"Having a gay time now?" she inquired.

"Much better." I turned again to my new acquaintance. "This is an unusual party for me. I haven't even seen the host. I live over there—" I waved my hand at the invisible hedge in the distance, "and this man Gatsby sent over his chauffeur with an invitation."

For a moment he looked at me as if he failed to understand.

"I'm Gatsby," he said suddenly.

"What!" I exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon."

"I thought you knew, old sport. I'm afraid I'm not a very good host."

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favour. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Some time before he introduced himself I'd got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care.

Almost at the moment when Mr. Gatsby identified

himself a butler hurried toward him with the information that Chicago was calling him on the wire. He excused himself with a small bow that included each of us in turn.

"If you want anything just ask for it, old sport," he urged me. "Excuse me. I will rejoin you later."

When he was gone I turned immediately to Jordan—constrained to assure her of my surprise. I had expected that Mr. Gatsby would be a florid and corpulent person in his middle years.

"Who is he?" I demanded. "Do you know?"

"He's just a man named Gatsby."

"Where is he from, I mean? And what does he do?"

"Now *you're* started on the subject," she answered with a wan smile. "Well, he told me once he was an Oxford man."

A dim background started to take shape behind him, but at her next remark it faded away.

"However, I don't believe it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she insisted, "I just don't think he went there."

Something in her tone reminded me of the other girl's "I think he killed a man," and had the effect of stimulating my curiosity. I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York. That was comprehensible. But young men didn't—at least in my provincial inexperience I believed they didn't—drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound.

"Anyhow, he gives large parties," said Jordan, changing the subject with an urban distaste for the concrete. "And I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy."

There was the boom of a bass drum, and the voice of the orchestra leader rang out suddenly above the echolalia of the garden.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried. "At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff's latest work, which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation." He smiled with jovial condescension, and added: "Some sensation!" Whereupon everybody laughed.

"The piece is known," he concluded lustily, "as 'Vladimir Tostoff's Jazz History of the World!'"

The nature of Mr. Tostoff's composition eluded me, because just as it began my eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes. His tanned skin was drawn attractively tight on his face and his short hair looked as though it were trimmed every day. I could see nothing sinister about him. I wondered if the fact that he was not drinking helped to set him off from his guests, for it seemed to me that he grew more correct as the fraternal hilarity increased. When the "Jazz History of the World" was over, girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups, knowing that someone would arrest their falls—but no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby's shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby's head for one link.

"I beg your pardon."

Gatsby's butler was suddenly standing beside us.

"Miss Baker?" he inquired. "I beg your pardon, but Mr. Gatsby would like to speak to you alone."

"With me?" she exclaimed in surprise.

“Yes, madame.”

She got up slowly, raising her eyebrows at me in astonishment, and followed the butler toward the house. I noticed that she wore her evening-dress, all her dresses, like sports clothes—there was a jauntiness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings.

I was alone and it was almost two. For some time confused and intriguing sounds had issued from a long, many-windowed room which overhung the terrace. Eluding Jordan’s undergraduate, who was now engaged in an obstetrical conversation with two chorus girls, and who implored me to join him, I went inside.

The large room was full of people. One of the girls in yellow was playing the piano, and beside her stood a tall, red-haired young lady from a famous chorus, engaged in song. She had drunk a quantity of champagne, and during the course of her song she had decided, ineptly, that everything was very, very sad—she was not only singing, she was weeping too. Whenever there was a pause in the song she filled it with gasping, broken sobs, and then took up the lyric again in a quavering soprano. The tears coursed down her cheeks—not freely, however, for when they came into contact with her heavily beaded eyelashes they assumed an inky colour, and pursued the rest of their way in slow black rivulets. A humorous suggestion was made that she sing the notes on her face, whereupon she threw up her hands, sank into a chair, and went off into a deep vinous sleep.

“She had a fight with a man who says he’s her husband,” explained a girl at my elbow.

I looked around. Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands. Even Jordan’s party, the quartet from East Egg, were rent asunder by dissension. One of the men was talking

with curious intensity to a young actress, and his wife, after attempting to laugh at the situation in a dignified and indifferent way, broke down entirely and resorted to flank attacks—at intervals she appeared suddenly at his side like an angry diamond, and hissed: “You promised!” into his ear.

The reluctance to go home was not confined to wayward men. The hall was at present occupied by two deplorably sober men and their highly indignant wives. The wives were sympathizing with each other in slightly raised voices.

“Whenever he sees I’m having a good time he wants to go home.”

“Never heard anything so selfish in my life.”

“We’re always the first ones to leave.”

“So are we.”

“Well, we’re almost the last tonight,” said one of the men sheepishly. “The orchestra left half an hour ago.”

In spite of the wives’ agreement that such malevolence was beyond credibility, the dispute ended in a short struggle, and both wives were lifted, kicking, into the night.

As I waited for my hat in the hall the door of the library opened and Jordan Baker and Gatsby came out together. He was saying some last word to her, but the eagerness in his manner tightened abruptly into formality as several people approached him to say goodbye.

Jordan’s party were calling impatiently to her from the porch, but she lingered for a moment to shake hands.

“I’ve just heard the most amazing thing,” she whispered. “How long were we in there?”

“Why, about an hour.”

“It was... simply amazing,” she repeated abstractedly.



"But I swore I wouldn't tell it and here I am tantalizing you." She yawned gracefully in my face. "Please come and see me... Phone book... Under the name of Mrs. Sigourney Howard... My aunt..." She was hurrying off as she talked—her brown hand waved a jaunty salute as she melted into her party at the door.

Rather ashamed that on my first appearance I had stayed so late, I joined the last of Gatsby's guests, who were clustered around him. I wanted to explain that I'd hunted for him early in the evening and to apologize for not having known him in the garden.

"Don't mention it," he enjoined me eagerly. "Don't give it another thought, old sport." The familiar expression held no more familiarity than the hand which reassuringly brushed my shoulder. "And don't forget we're going up in the hydroplane tomorrow morning, at nine o'clock."

Then the butler, behind his shoulder:

"Philadelphia wants you on the phone, sir."

"All right, in a minute. Tell them I'll be right there... Good night."

"Good night."

"Good night." He smiled—and suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he had desired it all the time. "Good night, old sport... Good night."

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "Excerpt from Chapter Three" *The Great Gatsby*, 1925. <https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/64317/pg64317-images.html> Public Domain.

## Film Trailers and *New York Times* Reviews

After reading the excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*, watch these

four film trailers. If you choose to take a New Historicism approach, you should use the 1926 version. For a cultural studies approach, please choose two trailers/reviews from the 1949, 1974, and 2013 versions.

### 1926 Version

Review: Hall, Mordaunt. "Gold and Cocktails." *The New York Times*. November 22, 1926. <https://www.nytimes.com/1926/11/22/archives/gold-and-cocktails.html>



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=458#oembed-1>

### 1949 Version

Review: Crowther, Bosley. "The Screen in Review: 'The Great Gatsby,' Based on the Novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Opens at the Paramount." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1949/07/14/archives/the-screen-in-review-the-great-gatsby-based-on-novel-of-f-scott.html>



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can

view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=458#oembed-2>

## 1974 Version

Review: Canby, Vincent. "A Lavish 'Gatsby' Loses the Book's Spirit." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/03/28/archives/a-lavish-gatsby-loses-book-s-spirit.html%20%0d2013>



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=458#oembed-3>

## 2013 Version

Review: Scott, A.O. "Shimmying Off the Literary Mantle." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/10/movies/the-great-gatsby-interpreted-by-baz-luhrmann.html>



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can

view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=458#oembed-4>

## Theoretical Response Assignment Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class. The instructions for New Historicism are slightly different than the instructions for other sections of this textbook, so please review them carefully.

### Instructions

**Step One:** Read the short story and look over the two cartoons posted in this chapter.

**Step Two:** Use the questions that follow the artifacts to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help. You will need to research and cite at least one outside source for this assignment.

**Step Three:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Four:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*

# 29. New Historicism and Cultural Studies Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=460#oembed-1>*

## Slide One: New Historicism and Cultural Studies

Welcome! I'm Dr. Liza Long. In this presentation for English 211, we will learn more about New Historicism and cultural studies as critical approaches to texts. New Historicism is a term coined by the Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt. This form of criticism developed in North America in the latter part of the twentieth century and is an interchangeable term with Cultural Materialism that developed at roughly the same time in the United Kingdom. Cultural studies also developed in the later part of the twentieth century, building on the ideas of Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin among others. In both types of analysis, you'll notice that the center of our target is now not the text, but the context.

As we learn more about how to take a New Historicism or cultural studies approach in literary analysis, we're going to consider some questions that may feel familiar to some of you from your previous experiences with literary analysis. In this type of approach, we will start, as we did with historical/biographical criticism, with this question: Who is the author?

Now you may be thinking, I thought the author was dead! Yes, Barthes killed the author, but now we need to resuscitate the author because for both New Historicism and cultural studies, the author, or at least, the author's cultural context, matters to our understanding the text.

You may remember that when we briefly reviewed historical/biographical criticism, we were mainly concerned with these questions: Who wrote this text, and when was it written? We have already used biographical context and considered how it illuminates the text when we read Phyllis Wheatley's poem and contemporary biography.

However, with New Historicism and cultural studies, we will bring in the argument that there are in fact no stable facts in history. History, as you may have heard, is written by the winners. So instead of focusing on historical "facts," we will be considering something instead that French philosopher Michel Foucault called "the discourse." We can think of this term as a system of thought, knowledge, or communication that constructs our experience of the world. Since the people in power generally control these systems, subsequent literary theories began to move beyond the context to explore the role that power dynamics play in literature's creation and dissemination.

Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose are two scholars who are credited with developing New Historicism as an approach to literary texts, working from these ideas that Foucault introduced about history. Cultural Materialism is a term coined by Raymond Williams, who viewed this approach as a combination of left-wing culture studies and Marxist

criticism. Cultural studies, as I noted above, developed from the ideas of philosophers like Barthes and Bakhtin. We will read scholarship from Stuart Hall, a Jamaican born philosopher and critic largely viewed as one of the founders of British Cultural Studies.

If you're thinking that New Historicism and cultural studies approaches depend on the ideas we considered when we studied deconstruction, you're right. The idea that there's no stable meaning in a text is like the idea that there are no stable facts in history, and with both types of criticism, we consider why certain meanings are privileged or preferred over others. When we take a New Historicism or cultural studies approach, we will also look at the text as just one of many possible cultural artifacts from its context.

I want to briefly mention Marxist criticism, postcolonial criticism, and ethnic studies here because these could also be considered under a New Historicism umbrella, but I think they deserve their own section because of their more explicit focus on power, marginalization, and sociopolitical structures. With these forms of criticism, we will look at the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures, or higher and lower socioeconomic classes. This is an example of the idea of excluded voices and preferred or privileged meanings that we explored with deconstruction.

## **Slide Two: Historical/Biographical Criticism: A Reminder**

To understand more about how New Historicism and cultural studies work, let's think back to biographical criticism. At some point in your life as a reader and writer, you've looked at an author within their context, to illuminate the text that they wrote. But to do this, we have to make some assumptions. First,



we must assume that history is something we can actually know. And second, we must assume that literature actually mirrors or reflects some kind of historical reality. This is the idea that maybe history can be objective, fact-based, or “true” in some meaningful sense of the word.

## **Slide Three: New Historicism and Cultural Studies**

But both New Historicism and cultural studies approaches start with the premise that there's no such thing as a knowable, objective history. Instead, we focus on the text as an artifact within its own cultural framework. We cannot forget that literature often has a political function, and this is a question we can explore with a New Historicism or cultural studies approach. And as we noted earlier, literature can express ideas about power structures, either intentionally or unintentionally, by what is included or excluded from the narrative.

Thus, instead of looking for objective truth, with New Historicism and cultural studies, we are looking for cultural constructs. How did a culture frame meaning and truth within its time period, for example? We look to literature to see what it can reveal about a culture within a certain time period. With New Historicism, history itself becomes a text to be interrogated. With cultural studies, a literary text becomes one of many types of cultural artifacts. If you've ever been interested in film studies or media studies, these are both cultural studies approaches.

I personally think these types of criticism can be pretty fun, and I really enjoyed thinking about the assignment we will use to practice New Historicism and cultural studies. Some questions you might consider include the following:

- How do people think?

- How was society organized?
- What stereotypes or taboos existed when this text was written?
- How is the text an artifact of its culture?
- Are the dominant forces in a culture “totalizing” or is culture’s power incomplete? (Harpham 1991)

As you think about the contemporary literature we have been reading in this class, you can see how thinking about the text as a cultural artifact might shape or inform the way that you perform your analysis.

## **Slide Four: History as Text and the Discourse**

Michel Foucault is one of the most influential thinkers along with Derrida in terms of modern literary criticism. The French critics had quite an influence on our literary analysis today. One of Foucault’s more profound insights, which I mentioned previously, was that written history itself is a text, something that can be analyzed and even deconstructed. Foucault argues that any society’s norms are in fact, social constructs. Societal norms are the things that we agree are correct or incorrect in terms of our behavior within society. New Historicism can throw into confusion the whole idea of what is normal. (I usually tell students that “normal” is a setting on a washing machine, and that’s about all I know about this word). You will be reading an excerpt from Foucault in this section of the book. Here’s a quote from his 1982 essay “The Subject and the Power” that shows how he thinks about the role of the individual in society: “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political “double

bind,” which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.”

## Slide Five: Popular Culture and Texts

With cultural studies, we are more concerned with how literary texts are just one of many cultural artifacts. Barthes, Bakhtin, Hall, and other cultural studies scholars all question the nature of texts within the culture that creates, receives, and is shaped by them. For cultural studies, meaning is constructed through a feedback loop of production and consumption (Bakhtin called this process “dialogism”). The interpretation of a text and its critical reception inevitably changes over time. And as Hall notes, the dominant culture (the people in charge) have an interest in making sure they control the definitions of culture. In the passage you’ll read, Hall notes that “‘Cultural change’ is a polite euphemism for the process by which some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the centre of popular life, actively marginalised.”

To better understand this idea, let’s consider a relatively new social media phenomenon that most of us are familiar with: Cancel culture. This term is used to describe the practice of rejecting or boycotting a person, company, or creative work because the entity is somehow found objectionable or offensive. How would cultural studies scholars approach this phenomenon?

First, it’s important to note that cultural studies scholars could employ a wide variety of approaches because the field is so intersectional. But here are a few approaches we might expect to see:

1. **Historical Context:** Cancel culture could be understood as a continuation of broader historical practices of ostracism and social exclusion. Cultural studies scholars might

examine how cancel culture has evolved over time, drawing connections with past movements such as McCarthyism or the Red Scare, or with historical practices of shunning and excommunication.

2. **Power Dynamics:** Central to cultural studies is the analysis of power dynamics within cultural practices. Scholars might investigate how cancel culture is used as a tool by different groups to enforce or challenge norms, ideologies, and hierarchies. They might consider how power imbalances shape who is targeted by cancel culture and how the consequences of cancellation are distributed.
3. **Media and Communication:** Cultural studies often explores how media and communication technologies shape culture. Scholars might examine how social media platforms enable and amplify cancel culture, how news media frame and sensationalize cancellation stories, or how public figures navigate the attention economy in the age of cancel culture.
4. **Identity and Representation:** Cancel culture often intersects with issues of identity, representation, and cultural appropriation. Cultural studies scholars might examine how cancel culture is informed by discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity, and how it affects the representation and visibility of marginalized groups.
5. **Moral Panics:** Cultural studies is interested in moral panics and how they shape public discourse and policy. Scholars might explore how cancel culture is framed in public discourse, how it's portrayed in media narratives, and how it influences political debates and policy-making.
6. **Counter-Culture and Resistance:** Cultural studies often examines counter-cultural movements and resistance to dominant cultural norms. Scholars might analyze how individuals and groups push back against cancel culture, the tactics they use, and the strategies they employ to

resist social censure.

7. **Ethical Considerations:** Finally, cultural studies scholars might grapple with the ethical dimensions of cancel culture. They might explore questions about accountability, redemption, forgiveness, and the limits of public shaming and ostracism as means of social change.

The specific approaches and themes that scholars take will likely be influenced by their disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical frameworks, and personal values and beliefs. When you choose to take a cultural studies approach, you would likely focus on just one or two aspects of a list like this.

## Slide Six: How to Do New Historicism/ Cultural Studies Criticism

The previous slide probably gave you some ideas about how to take a cultural studies approach to a text. So how do we do New Historicism? As we look at this list of possible techniques, remember that you don't need to do all these things in your analysis. As with our cultural studies list, any one of the approaches on this list would work, and you could also combine approaches. For example, you could look at both social and cultural constructs and identify power dynamics. Or you could consider the historical context and look at historical change and continuity as it relates to your text. I like to pay attention to what interests me most about a text as I read. What elements of the text make me curious about the context? Remember that with this type of criticism, you will need to cite outside sources. I often use Wikipedia as a starting point, especially to learn more about authors and their historical periods. However, try to move beyond Wikipedia for the sources you cite in your paper. JSTOR is an excellent database that you can use for your research.

## Slide Seven: Applying New Historicism/ Cultural Studies Criticism

Let's look at our example text, "Lament for Dark Peoples" by Langston Hughes. Listen as I read the poem.

"I was a red man one time,  
But the white men came.  
I was a black man, too,  
But the white men came.  
They drove me out of the forest.  
They took me away from the jungles.  
I lost my trees.  
I lost my silver moons.  
Now they've caged me  
In the circus of civilization.  
Now I herd with the many—  
Caged in the circus of civilization."

As you listened, what questions did you have about the context? We know this poem was written in 1926. A quick search reveals that Langston Hughes was an influential African American poet during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Knowing this basic context can help us to understand the speaker and his relationship to "white civilization" better. In our textbook, I have walked you through how to do some basic research in JSTOR to provide additional context. I have also shown you how to use this text as a cultural artifact, positioning it in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, then reconsidering the text in light of its current reception. Considering how your reception of a text might differ from a reader who was contemporary with the poet is an example of how New Historicism can overlap with reader response criticism. Once you've researched the context, you'll make an argument about the text using some aspect of culture, power

dynamics, social constructs, or some other contextual approach.

## Slide Eight: New Historicism Terms to Use (Lots!)

We have a lot of terms to master in this unit. Let's start with **the author**. Remember that with New Historicism, we are not doing biographical criticism. The author is part of Foucault's idea of the discourse, where both history and text are a form of conversation, and there's not an objective "knowable" truth about the author. The author is just part of the system of discourse that existed during the time when the text was written. As with Reader Response, we will think more about the **implied author** rather than the actual author. Who is the implied author in terms of the text's context?

We've covered **intention** already, both here and in our sections on biographical criticism and New Criticism. As with New Criticism, New Historicism does not consider an author's intent to be meaningful, even if it could be "known," (such as through the author's own writings) because the author's supposed intent would be shaped and determined by the cultural constructs of the period when the text was written and because readers will use their own cultural context to "create" author intent as they read the text in its new context. We can think about the **implied author** though: what would the author be expected to write? And how does that expectation play out in the text?

**Cultural Materialism**, as we learned, is the British version of New Historicism. If you encounter the term Cultural Materialism, it basically means New Historicism.

**Culture** is a particular society. Think about the texts that we've been reading in this course. What is the culture in which

they were produced? How does the text reflect that culture? For example, do you see evidence of power dynamics? Do the characters follow norms or conventions that seem arbitrary? Understanding the culture that produced the work is important to this type of criticism. We'll see some overlap in this critical method with other fields, most notably history, but also anthropology.

As we have already learned, Foucault's idea of **the discourse** is a system of thought, knowledge, or communication that constructs our experience of the world. When we consider a text's context, we can also consider how our understanding of the discourse has changed. Think of the popular holiday song "Baby, It's Cold Outside." What cultural constructs and norms dictated relationships between men and women during that period? And how is that same text perceived today? Think about that difference, and I think that can help you to clarify, the challenge of New Historicism. Is it "fair" to judge a text on modern terms?

Another idea from Foucault is **episteme**, a term which comes from the Greek word for knowledge. This is how Foucault discussed the rules about "legitimate" knowledge that dominate a particular culture in a particular period. It's a general system of thought within a culture. We are seeing some dissonance in our own culture's episteme right now. Think about how political parties in the United States might define what constitutes "legitimate" knowledge differently, for example.

**Paradigm** also comes from Greek, meaning pattern or example. In ancient Greek, it was simply an illustration of something. This term was introduced in its modern sense by Thomas Kuhn, an American philosopher of science. A paradigm tells us what problems are legitimate (what we can investigate) and what solutions to those problems are acceptable. Paradigm and episteme are sometimes used as synonyms, but they have differences, with paradigm being



more narrowly focused on a specific field of inquiry, and episteme representing the more nebulous connections among paradigms.

**Literary History** is another branch of this type of criticism. For example, we might look at 19th century Russian literature, the so-called “Golden Age,” and how texts produced during this period seem to be in conversation with each other. Chekhov was very heavily influenced by Tolstoy, we have Dostoevsky writing at the same time, with Gogol and Turgenev just slightly predating them. Russia produced an amazing flowering of literature in the 19th century that influenced world literature. With literary history, we are looking at these kinds of connections: what connections can we see in 17th century British literature, or the Enlightenment, or the Renaissance? We would call these “**periods**” of literature in New Historicism. Similarly, a **tradition** is a genre that has a lengthy history. For example, think of the epic tradition in the Western canon, which stretches from Homer to modern works.

Finally, **influence** is important in New Historicism because texts are not created in a vacuum. We might consider influence in a few different ways. It’s been said, for example, that there are only two plots in the world: The Hero’s journey, and a stranger comes to town. How much does one text borrow from another, and when does borrowing cross a line? One example familiar to some of you would be *Wicked*, a deconstruction of the acclaimed Wizard of Oz. Even the movie *Star Wars* is basically Joseph Campbell’s “Hero with a Thousand Faces” set in space.

## Slide Nine: Cultural Studies Terms and Questions

Cultural studies approaches use many of the same terms that New Historicism does. Here are a few additional terms you

should know. If you've taken an anthropology or sociology class, these terms may be familiar to you.

An **artifact** is any object or item that has significance within a particular culture. Artifacts can range from everyday objects like clothing or tools, to more culturally specific items like religious symbols or artworks. In cultural studies, artifacts are often analyzed as symbolic representations of cultural values, beliefs, and practices.

**Representation** refers to the ways in which individuals, groups, or ideas are depicted in various forms of media or cultural texts. Cultural studies scholars examine how representations can be shaped by power dynamics, ideology, and social norms, and how they can influence perceptions and behaviors. Representation can encompass a wide range of media, including literature, film, television, advertising, and digital media.

**Cultural appropriation** refers to the adoption or use of elements from one culture by members of another culture, often without regard for the cultural significance or context of those elements. Cultural studies scholars analyze cultural appropriation as a form of power imbalance, where dominant groups exploit and profit from the cultural practices of marginalized groups. They may also examine the ways in which cultural appropriation can reinforce stereotypes, perpetuate inequality, and contribute to the erasure of cultural identities.

**Identity**, within cultural studies, refers to the ways in which individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others within a particular cultural context. Identity is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, and social class. Cultural studies scholars examine how identity is constructed, negotiated, and contested through cultural practices, representations, and power dynamics.

**Lifestyle**, in a cultural studies context, refers to the patterns of behavior, values, and preferences that characterize a particular

individual, group, or society. Cultural studies scholars analyze lifestyle as a reflection of cultural norms, ideologies, and social structures. They may examine how lifestyle choices are influenced by factors such as class, race, gender, and media.

**Media** is an important concept in cultural studies. The term refers to the various channels and technologies used to communicate and disseminate information, ideas, and culture. This includes traditional forms of media such as newspapers, television, radio, and film, as well as digital media such as social media, websites, and streaming platforms. Cultural studies scholars analyze media as a powerful cultural force that shapes our perceptions, values, and behaviors. They may examine how media texts are produced, circulated, and consumed, and how they influence public discourse, political debates, and social movements.

**Popular culture** refers to the cultural products and practices that are widely consumed and enjoyed by a large audience. This includes forms of entertainment such as music, film, television, literature, fashion, and sports, as well as everyday activities like cooking, gaming, and social media. Cultural studies scholars analyze popular culture as a site of meaning-making, where dominant cultural values and ideologies are both reflected and contested. They may examine how popular culture is produced, consumed, and interpreted, and how it shapes our sense of identity, belonging, and social norms.

**Kitsch** refers to art, objects, or cultural products that are considered to be in poor taste or of low artistic value, often due to their sentimental or overly decorative nature. Cultural studies scholars may analyze kitsch as a form of cultural production that reflects and reinforces particular values and ideologies. They may also examine how kitsch can be used as a tool for social critique or subversion, and how it can challenge dominant cultural norms and conventions. Think back to Stuart Hall's essay, for example.

## Slide Ten: Limitations of New Historicism and Cultural Studies

What about the limits of New Historicism and cultural studies? These include the risks of relativism—instead of looking for universal truths in a text, as we did with New Criticism, we are considering the text as it exists in its historical context. Some critics also contend that New Historicism and cultural studies approaches overemphasize power dynamics. We will continue to explore power relationships when we look at Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies lenses in the next section.

Determinism takes away author intent entirely. It says that the historical context makes the text's contents inevitable; that the author could not have written any other text. Some scholars may selectively apply historical evidence—don't do this. When you consider the context, don't "pick sides" in your approach. Like determinism, New Historicism and cultural studies can treat literary texts "merely" as cultural artifacts rather than considering them as works of art.

Finally, there's the tendency for imposing our contemporary values onto historical texts—though considering how an author's reception has changed, as we did with Langston Hughes, is an interesting question because we are looking at how culture changes over time. This exploration of how culture changes is common in cultural studies criticism.

## Slide Eleven: The Great Gatsby

For our New Historicism and cultural studies theoretical response, we will take a slightly different approach compared with previous chapters. Everyone will read an excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald and review four film trailers and reviews below. You'll then choose between two

options—New Historicism or cultural studies—to complete your theoretical response. Note that in both cases, your theoretical response will be slightly longer (750-1000 words) this week because you'll need to integrate multiple sources.

For both options, you'll need to do a little research about F. Scott Fitzgerald to learn more about his time period but remember that this type of criticism is not biographical criticism. We want to know how the text reflects the time in which the author lived. Think about things like culture, the discourse, ideology, power structure, norms, and how the text is one artifact of these elements. You'll also likely need to do some research about what was going on in the mid-1920s in America.

As part of your research, consider the voices that are missing from the artifacts. What does this tell us about the culture that produced these artifacts? Finally, how do we view these cultural artifacts today?

I hope you have fun with these critical approaches. Looking at a text within its context, while also applying Foucault's approach to history, will set the stage for Marxist, postcolonial, ethnic studies, and feminist criticism, which we will study later in the course. Have a great week, and let me know if you have any questions!

# 30. Feedback

LIZA LONG

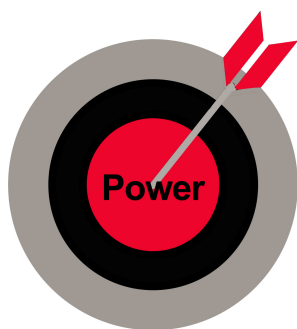
I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)



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## SECTION VI

# POWER: MARXIST, POSTCOLONIAL, AND ETHNIC STUDIES CRITICISM



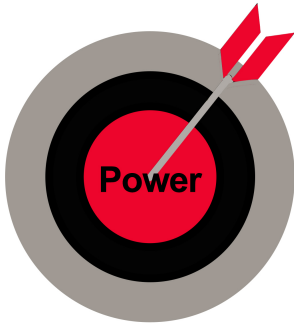
*Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies criticism investigate power dynamics in literary texts, exploring how socio-political structures, economic systems, colonial legacies, and cultural influences shape and reflect power relationships within narratives. In the following*

*chapters, you will learn more about these types of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*





# 31. What Is Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism?



In this chapter, we will look at three different critical approaches that are related to New Historicism's rejection of stable facts in history. These approaches—Marxist criticism, postcolonial criticism, and ethnic studies—share a common goal: to examine the role of power as it is reflected in

literary texts. While these theories were developed and applied to literary texts at different times, literary scholars continue to use these lenses to explore how texts shape and are shaped by power structures and hierarchies.

**Marxist criticism** is a critical approach to literature that views texts through the lens of economic and social class structures and the relationships of power and oppression that exist within these structures. This type of criticism is based on the ideas of Karl Marx, a 19th-century German philosopher and economist, who argued that social class is the primary determinant of human history and culture. Marxist critics examine the ways in which literature reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology and power structures of a society, as well as the ways in which texts can challenge and subvert these ideologies. The Marxist

critic Terry Eagleton explains it this way: “Marxist criticism is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and, meanings. But it also means grasping those forms styles and meanings as the product of a particular history” (Eagleton 3). One of the key principles of Marxist criticism is the idea that literature is not a neutral or objective reflection of reality, but is instead shaped by the interests and values of those who produce and consume it. When we do Marxist criticism, we are concerned with class struggles and the means of production.

**Postcolonial criticism** is a theoretical and analytical framework that emerged in the 1980s as a response to the legacy of European colonialism and imperialism from the 18th-20th centuries. It seeks to examine how the experiences of colonized peoples are represented in literature and other cultural forms, and how these representations reflect and perpetuate colonial power relations. With this lens, we explore how colonialism impacts language, identity, and culture, and how these impacts are reflected in literary texts. The term “post” does not imply that colonialism has ended; it refers to the effects on Indigneous people after colonialism. One of the key principles of postcolonial criticism is the importance of examining the intersectionality of colonialism with other forms of identity and oppression, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. It also emphasizes the importance of centering the perspectives and experiences of colonized peoples in literary analysis, and in understanding how their experiences are shaped by systemic colonialism and imperialism. Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism*, which considers how the West has used this term to denigrate the East, is widely credited with introducing this critical approach.

**Ethnic studies** is a broad term that encompasses a variety of critical approaches to literature, all focusing on a particular

ethnic group that is marginalized or subordinate to a dominant culture. For example, African American studies focuses on literature written by and for African Americans. Chicano/a studies explores literature produced by people of Mexican ancestry who live in the United States. Indigenous studies looks at literature from the perspective of native peoples in counties that have been colonized. For authors who are based in the United States, scholars use an ethnic studies rather than a postcolonial approach, even though both postcolonialism and ethnic studies are concerned with the imbalance of power between colonizers and Indigenous or marginalized peoples. All three types of criticism can be intersectional; in other words, it's entirely appropriate to consider both socioeconomic class and race (or gender, which we will study later in this book) in your critical analysis.

## Learning Objectives

- Recognize how different approaches determine possible outcomes in interpretation (CLO 1.3)
- Deliberate on what approach best suits particular texts and purposes (CLO 1.4)
- Understand how formal elements in literary texts create meaning within the context of culture and literary discourse. (CLO 2.1)
- Be exposed to a variety of critical strategies through literary theory lenses, such as formalism/ New Criticism, reader-response, structuralism,

deconstruction, historical and cultural approaches (New Historicism, postcolonial, Marxism), psychological approaches, feminism, and queer theory (CLO 4.1)

- Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing exposure to critical strategies that deal with cultural, historical, thematic, and theoretical contexts (CLO 6.1)
- Understand that interpretation is inherently political, and that it reveals assumptions and expectations about value, truth, and the human experience (CLO 7.1)
- Demonstrate awareness of the political stance one takes interpreting literature (CLO 7.2)
- Discuss the significance and impact of multiple perspectives on a given text (CLO 7.3)

## Excerpts from Scholarship

### Marxist: From “Bourgeois and Proletarians” in *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now

open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang the chartered burghers of the earliest towns. From these burgesses the first elements of the bourgeoisie were developed.

The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonisation of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.

The feudal system of industry, under which industrial production was monopolised by closed guilds, now no

longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place. The guild-masters were pushed on one side by the manufacturing middle class; division of labour between the different corporate guilds vanished in the face of division of labour in each single workshop.

Meantime the markets kept ever growing, the demand ever rising. Even manufacture no longer sufficed. Thereupon, steam and machinery revolutionised industrial production. The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry, the place of the industrial middle class, by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois.

Modern industry has established the world-market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its time, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.

We see, therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.

## Postcolonial: Excerpt from “The Profits of Postcolonialism” by Dorothy Figueira

Postcolonial criticism, like most poststructural theory,

relies in great measure on the notion that some heritage of systems limits the reader. Our present condition, although seemingly benign, imposes an existential limit, and theory alone can liberate us from systemic constraints (Fluck, "Literature, Liberalism" 216). Curiously missing from the discussion is any serious questioning of how the text's appearance as a network of hegemonic or subversive gestures suits the state of literary theoretical professionalization. Theory thus allows individuals cut off from any effective social action and buoyed by their security as academic professionals to claim solidarity with the disenfranchised. This alienation from real powerlessness (the academic Marxist's guilt vis-a-vis the worker) can then be compensated for by a posture of powerlessness vis-a-vis representation. But even this strategy sometimes fails. The critic must then self-fashion him/herself through imaginary marginalization or, as the German Americanist Winfried Fluck has termed it, "expressive individualism" (Fluck, "Literature, Liberalism" 228), resulting in the wide-ranging identification of a privileged class of academics with the marginalized other. The historically oppressed become the new role models for the critic, giving political authority to the search for cultural difference (Fluck, "Literature, Liberalism" 228). In this way, theory and professionalism interact and justify each other (Fluck, "Americanization" 18).

The lack of an effective historical consciousness explains the curious phenomenon that the study of postcoloniality has primarily found urgent currency in the First World, whereas few ripples resonate in the excolonized worlds of South Asia and Africa. The predominance of critical contestants in Euro-American centers reflects how much most theory is inherently

Eurocentric and culture bound (Clark 24). Thus, some critics have been led to ask what agendas lurk behind the academic formation called postcoloniality and its complicity with certain forms of Eurocentric cultural theory (Radhakrishnan 750). What power struggles are being replicated within this critical discourse? Does it represent nothing but a production of a comprador intelligentsia (Appiah 348)?

Nor has the posturing or positioning of postcolonial critics gone unquestioned. Benita Parry has accused them of exorbitation of their roles and the suppression of native voices (172). Arif Dirlik (343) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (598) cite the postcolonial theorists' disengagements from significant issues of neocolonialism and retreats into a ratified form of postmodern abstraction. Dirlik even sees postcolonialism's emergence as a form of global capitalism where critics, commanding high salaries in the First World, presume to be existentially connected to continuing problems of Third-World social, political and cultural domination.

As a result, postcolonial critics' refusal to define postcolonial theory in an unambiguous manner might not necessarily point to diversity or vitality, but rather to personal projects and games of identification. Any adequate analysis of the literature of postcolonial criticism cannot avoid highlighting the extent to which the intellectual rigor and development of this criticism are seriously circumscribed by ideological posturing, reifying critical jargon, and strategies of self-representation. It might well be that postcolonial criticism never intended to address directly the myriad problems of analyzing Third-World societies, but rather has been fascinated with theorizing structures of power and, by extension, the critic's position vis-a-vis these



structures. This subtext informs a work such as Zantop's *Colonial Fantasies* (1997), where the German imaginaire is the focus of discussion rather than any historical colonial reality. A German fictional literature on colonialism is then telescoped to show the ways in which fantasies of power can function even in a vacuum. The Holocaust becomes the inevitable case where such fantasies are unleashed upon reality. Here, the logic of postcoloniality reaches its natural conclusion, where a text is only a text and refers to no historical action. No coloniality, no postcoloniality, just ruminations on fantasies of power. Postcolonial studies of this genre strike the old-fashioned pose of the European psychoanalyst who unmask the cultural crime of deformation. They are based on the virtually self-explanatory phenomenon of cultural struggle and adjustment. Since the postcolonial subject/critic is someone with access to positional knowledge, the work of generations of nonpostcolonial scholars (Orientalists or others who fit only marginally into the construction of Orientalism) is not particularly important. Even those who made a genuine effort to bring cultures formerly called "Oriental" into the Euro-American continuum need not be examined. The postcolonial critic can dismiss this work as serving a decrepit ideology (Clark 23). Often the postcolonial critic is unaware that a body of scholarship written by area specialists pertaining to the topic even exists. In a quasimessianic manner, the postcolonial critic positions her/himself to speak for the Other. Since Spivak's subalterns theoretically are mute, she can effectively coopt their voice. In the process, she creates a need for the theorist (Spivak herself) who will determine the discourse of the victimized. This is, indeed, a slippery game. For the postcolonial critic, notions of voicelessness and absence serve to license

the neglect of any texts (“archives,” “voices,” and “spaces”) that contradict the theoretical script.

## African American Studies: Excerpt from “Controversial Blackness: The Historical Development & Future Trajectory of African American Studies” by Martha Biondi

The black studies movement has been marked by intense debates over its academic character. During and after the years of its emergence, black studies was criticized, internally and externally, on two interrelated grounds: that it lacked curricular coherence and that, by not having a single methodology, it failed to meet the definition of a discipline. As a result, many educators in the early black studies movement pursued a two-pronged quest for a standardized curriculum, on the one hand, and an original, authoritative methodology on the other. At the same time, many scholars in the black studies movement questioned whether either of these pursuits was desirable or even attainable. In other words, while some scholars have insisted that African American studies must devise its own unique research methodology, others contend that as a multidiscipline, or interdisciplinary discipline, its strength lies in incorporating multiple, diverse methodologies. In a similar vein, while some have argued for a standardized curriculum, others argue that higher education is better served by dynamism and innovation. I argue that the discipline’s ultimate acceptance in academe (to the extent that it has gained acceptance) has come from the production of influential scholarship and research

and the development of new conceptual approaches that have influenced other disciplines.

Pioneering scholarship and influential intellectual innovations, rather than standardized pedagogy or methodology, have been the route to influence in American intellectual life. A tension between authority and freedom animates these debates. As late as 2000, an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reinforced the idea that multiple perspectives and methodologies had retarded the trajectory of African American studies. The author of an essay on the state of the field criticized the diverse character of African American studies courses at different universities: “The Ohio State class is chronological with a literary bent,” she wrote. “Duke’s take: cultural studies. The Penn course filters everything through a W.E.B. Du Bois lens, and N.Y.U. combines pan-Africanism with urban studies.” Of course, this sampling reflects the range one would find in the departments of history, sociology, or English at these same universities. But the author stresses disarray. “There’s a reason 30 years after the discipline developed that people still wonder whether the black-studies curriculum represents a coherent subject or a smorgasbord,” she concludes. In this view, the discipline’s strengths—“eclectic, expansive, experimental curricula”—are also its weaknesses....

Scholars and teachers influenced by Afrocentricity have been among the most consistent advocates of the need to create a distinctive methodology. For Temple University scholar Molefi Asante, Afrocentricity “is the only way you can approach African American Studies” because it puts ancient African knowledge systems at the center of analysis. For Greg Carr of Howard University, the challenge is to draw on “deep Africana

thought,” the traditions of” classical and medieval Africa,” for guidance in enacting positive social change for African descendants. A key mission of African American studies, he believes, should be to reconnect “narratives of African identity to the contemporary era.” His department taps “into the long genealogy of Africana experiences” in order to assess how to improve the world. Carr distinguishes this mission from the mission of African American studies on other campuses. “We’re not trying to explain blackness for white people” or looking at “our contributions to American society.” Rather, the approach at Howard is “an extension of the long arc of Africana intellectual work.” The inclination to look for insights in the precolonial African past, rejecting European modernity and thereby hoping to escape or resolve the legacies of colonialism and enslavement, is fundamental to the approach that leading architects of Afrocentricity have taken.

## Looking for Power Relationships in Texts

The short story “A Cup of Tea” by the New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield, who was an important author in the modernist movement, provides opportunities for us to consider a text through its power dynamics. Mansfield was from a socially prominent and well-off family. When she was in her twenties, she had a romantic relationship with a Māori woman, Maata Mahupuku. The short story below is set in London, where Mansfield went to college and lived for many years before her death from tuberculosis at the age of 34.

## A Cup of Tea (1921)

BY KATHERINE  
MANSFIELD

ROSEMARY FELL was not exactly beautiful. No, you couldn't have called her beautiful. Pretty? Well, if you took her to pieces ... But why be so cruel as to take anyone to pieces? She was young, brilliant, extremely modern, exquisitely well dressed, amazingly well read in the newest of the new books, and her parties were the most delicious mixture of the

really important people and... artists—quaint creatures, discoveries of hers, some of them too terrifying for words, but others quite presentable and amusing.

Rosemary had been married two years. She had a duck of a boy. No, not Peter—Michael. And her husband absolutely adored her. They were rich, really rich, not just comfortably well off, which is odious and stuffy and sounds like one's grandparents. But if Rosemary



*New Zealand author  
Katherine Mansfield, 1888-1923*

wanted to shop she would go to Paris as you and I would go to Bond Street. If she wanted to buy flowers, the car pulled up at that perfect shop in Regent Street, and Rosemary inside the shop just gazed in her dazzled, rather exotic way, and said: " I want those and those and those. Give me four bunches of those. And that jar of roses. Yes, I'll have all the roses in the jar. No, no lilac. I hate lilac. It's got no shape." The attendant bowed and put the lilac out of sight, as though this was only too true; lilac was dreadfully shapeless. " Give me those stumpy little tulips. Those red and white ones." And she was followed to the car by a thin shopgirl staggering under an immense white paper armful that looked like a baby in long clothes...

One winter afternoon she had been buying something in a little antique shop in Curzon Street. It was a shop she liked. For one thing, one usually had it to oneself. And then the man who kept it was ridiculously fond of serving her. He beamed whenever she came in. He clasped his hands ; he was so gratified he could scarcely speak. Flattery, of course. All the same, there was something...

" You see, madam," he would explain in his low respectful tones, " I love my things. I would rather not part with them than sell them to someone who does not appreciate them, who has not that fine feeling which is so rare..." And, breathing deeply he unrolled a tiny square of blue velvet and pressed it on the glass counter with his pale finger-tips.

To-day it was a little box. He had been keeping it for her. He had shown it to nobody as yet. An exquisite little enamel box with a glaze so fine it looked as

though it had been baked in cream. On the lid a minute creature stood under a flowery tree, and a more minute creature still had her arms round his neck. Her hat, really no bigger than a geranium petal, hung from a branch ; it had green ribbons. And there was a pink cloud like a watchful cherub floating above their heads. Rosemary took her hands out of her long gloves. She always took off her gloves to examine such things. Yes, she liked it very much. She loved it; it was a great duck. She must have it. And, turning the creamy box, opening and shutting it, she couldn't help noticing how charming her hands were against the blue velvet. The shopman, in some dim cavern of his mind, may have dared to think so too. For he took a pencil, leant over the counter, and his pale bloodless fingers crept timidly towards those rosy, flashing ones, as he murmured gently : " If I may venture to point out to madam, the flowers on the little lady's bodice."

" Charming! " Rosemary admired the flowers. But what was the price ? For a moment the shopman did not seem to hear. Then a murmur reached her. " Twenty-eight guineas, madam."

" Twenty-eight guineas." Rosemary gave no sign. She laid the little box down ; she buttoned her gloves again. Twenty-eight guineas. Even if one is rich... She looked vague. She stared at a plump tea-kettle like a plump hen above the shopman's head, and her voice was dreamy as she answered: " Well, keep it for me—will you ? I'll..."

But the shopman had already bowed as though keeping it for her was all any human being could ask.

He would be willing, of course, to keep it for her for ever.

The discreet door shut with a click. She was outside on the step, gazing at the winter afternoon. Rain was falling, and with the rain it seemed the dark came too, spinning down like ashes. There was a cold bitter taste in the air, and the new-lighted lamps looked sad. Sad were the lights in the houses opposite. Dimly they burned as if regretting something. And people hurried by, hidden under their hateful umbrellas. Rosemary felt a strange pang. She pressed her muff against her breast; she wished she had the little box, too, to cling to. Of course, the car was there. She'd only to cross the pavement. But still she waited. There are moments, horrible moments in life, when one emerges from shelter and looks out, and it's awful. One oughtn't to give way to them. One ought to go home and have an extra-special tea. But at the very instant of thinking that, a young girl, thin, dark, shadowy—where had she come from ?—was standing at Rosemary's elbow and a voice like a sigh, almost like a sob, breathed : " Madam, may I speak to you a moment ? "

"Speak to me ? " Rosemary turned. She saw a little battered creature with enormous eyes, someone quite young, no older than herself, who clutched at her coat-collar with reddened hands, and shivered as though she had just come out of the water.

"M-madam," stammered the voice. " Would you let me have the price of a cup of tea ? "

"A cup of tea ?" There was something simple, sincere



in that voice ; it wasn't in the least the voice of a beggar.  
" Then have you no money at all?" asked Rosemary.

"None, madam," came the answer.

"How extraordinary!" Rosemary peered through the dusk, and the girl gazed back at her. How more than extraordinary! And suddenly it seemed to Rosemary such an adventure. It was like something out of a novel by Dostoevsky, this meeting in the dusk. Supposing she took the girl home ? Supposing she did do one of those things she was always reading about or seeing on the stage, what would happen ? It would be thrilling. And she heard herself saying afterwards to the amazement of her friends : " I simply took her home with me," as she stepped forward and said to that dim person beside her : " Come home to tea with me."

The girl drew back startled. She even stopped shivering for a moment. Rosemary put out a hand and touched her arm. " I mean it," she said, smiling. And she felt how-simple and kind her smile was. " Why won't you ? Do. Come home with me now in my car and have tea."

"You—you don't mean it, madam," said the girl, and there was pain in her voice.

"But I do," cried Rosemary. " I want you to. To please me. Come along."

The girl put her fingers to her lips and her eyes devoured Rosemary. " You're—you're not taking me to the police station ? " she stammered.

"The police station ! " Rosemary laughed out. " Why

should I be so cruel ? No, I only want to make you warm and to hear— anything you care to tell me.”

Hungry people are easily led. The footman held the door of the car open, and a moment later they were skimming through the dusk.

“There!” said Rosemary. She had a feeling of triumph as she slipped her hand through the velvet strap. She could have said, “ Now I’ve got you,” as she gazed at the little captive she had netted. But of course she meant it kindly. Oh, more than kindly. She was going to prove to this girl that—wonderful things did happen in life, that—fairy godmothers were real, that— rich people had hearts, and that women *were* sisters. She turned impulsively, saying: “ Don’t be frightened. After all, why shouldn’t you come back with me ? We’re both women. If I’m the more fortunate, you ought to expect...”

But happily at that moment, for she didn’t know how the sentence was going to end, the car stopped. The bell was rung, the door opened, and with a charming, protecting, almost embracing movement, Rosemary drew the other into the hall. Warmth, softness, light, a sweet scent, all those things so familiar to her she never even thought about them, she watched that other receive. It was fascinating. She was like the rich little girl in her nursery with all the cupboards to open, all the boxes to unpack.

“Come, come upstairs,” said Rosemary, longing to begin to be generous. “ Come up to my room.” And, besides, she wanted to spare this poor little thing from being stared at by the servants; she decided as they

mounted the stairs she would not even ring for Jeanne, but take off her things by herself. The great thing was to be natural!

And "There !" cried Rosemary again, as they reached her beautiful big bedroom with the curtains drawn, the fire leaping on her wonderful lacquer furniture, her gold cushions and the primrose and blue rugs.

The girl stood just inside the door ; she seemed dazed. But Rosemary didn't mind that.

"Come and sit down," she cried, dragging her big chair up to the fire, " in this comfy chair. Come and get warm. You look so dreadfully cold."

"I daren't, madam," said the girl, and she edged backwards.

"Oh, please,"—Rosemary ran forward—" you mustn't be frightened, you mustn't, really. Sit down, and when I've taken off my things we shall go into the next room and have tea and be cosy. Why are you afraid ? " And gently she half pushed the thin figure into its deep cradle.

But there was no answer. The girl stayed just as she had been put, with her hands by her sides and her mouth slightly open. To be quite sincere, she looked rather stupid. But Rosemary wouldn't acknowledge it. She leant over her, saying : " Won't you take off your hat ? Your pretty hair is all wet. And one is so much more comfortable without a hat, isn't one ? "

There was a whisper that sounded like " Very good, madam," and the crushed hat was taken off.

“And let me help you off with your coat, too,” said Rosemary.

The girl stood up. But she held on to the chair with one hand and let Rosemary pull. It was quite an effort. The other scarcely helped her at all. She seemed to stagger like a child, and the thought came and went through Rosemary’s mind, that if people wanted helping they must respond a little, just a little, otherwise it became very difficult indeed. And what was she to do with the coat now ? She left it on the floor, and the hat too. She was just going to take a cigarette off the mantelpiece when the girl said quickly, but so lightly and strangely : “ I’m very sorry, madam, but I’m going to faint. I shall go off, madam, if I don’t have something.”

“Good heavens, how thoughtless I am ! ” Rosemary rushed to the bell.

“Tea ! Tea at once ! And some brandy immediately ! ”

The maid was gone again, but the girl almost cried out. “ No, I don’t want no brandy. I never drink brandy. It’s a cup of tea I want, madam.” And she burst into tears.

It was a terrible and fascinating moment. Rosemary knelt beside her chair.

“Don’t cry, poor little thing,” she said. “ Don’t cry.” And she gave the other her lace handkerchief. She really was touched beyond words. She put her arm round those thin, bird-like shoulders.

Now at last the other forgot to be shy, forgot everything except that they were both women, and

gasped out: " I can't go on no longer like this. I can't bear it. I can't bear it. I shall do away with myself. I can't bear no more."

"You shan't have to. I'll look after you. Don't cry any more. Don't you see what a good thing it was that you met me ? We'll have tea and you'll tell me everything. And I shall arrange something. I promise. *Do stop crying. It's so exhausting. Please !* "

The other did stop just in time for Rosemary to get up before the tea came. She had the table placed between them. She plied the poor little creature with everything, all the sandwiches, all the bread and butter, and every time her cup was empty she filled it with tea, cream and sugar. People always said sugar was so nourishing. As for herself she didn't eat; she smoked and looked away tactfully so that the other should not be shy.

And really the effect of that slight meal was marvellous. When the tea-table was carried away a new being, a light, frail creature with tangled hair, dark lips, deep, lighted eyes, lay back in the big chair in a kind of sweet languor, looking at the blaze. Rosemary lit a fresh cigarette ; it was time to begin.

"And when did you have your last meal ? " she asked softly.

But at that moment the door-handle turned.

"Rosemary, may I come in ? " It was Philip.

"Of course."

He came in. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he said, and stopped and stared.

"It's quite all right," said Rosemary smiling. "This is my friend, Miss——"

"Smith, madam," said the languid figure, who was strangely still and unafraid.

"Smith," said Rosemary. "We are going to have a little talk."

"Oh, yes," said Philip. "Quite," and his eye caught sight of the coat and hat on the floor. He came over to the fire and turned his back to it. "It's a beastly afternoon," he said curiously, still looking at that listless figure, looking at its hands and boots, and then at Rosemary again.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Rosemary enthusiastically. "Vile."

Philip smiled his charming smile. "As a matter of fact," said he, "I wanted you to come into the library for a moment. Would you? Will Miss Smith excuse us?"

The big eyes were raised to him, but Rosemary answered for her. "Of course she will." And they went out of the room together.

"I say," said Philip, when they were alone. "Explain. Who is she? What does it all mean?"

Rosemary, laughing, leaned against the door and said: "I picked her up in Curzon Street. Really. She's a real pick-up. She asked me for the price of a cup of tea, and I brought her home with me."

"But what on earth are you going to do with her?" cried Philip.

"Be nice to her," said Rosemary quickly. "Be frightfully nice to her. Look after her. I don't know how. We

haven't talked yet. But show her—treat her—make her feel——”

“My darling girl,” said Philip, “you’re quite mad, you know. It simply can’t be done.”

“I knew you’d say that,” retorted Rosemary. “Why not ? I want to. Isn’t that a reason ? And besides, one’s always reading about these things. I decided——”

“But,” said Philip slowly, and he cut the end of a cigar, “she’s so astonishingly pretty.”

“Pretty?” Rosemary was so surprised that she blushed. “Do you think so ? I—I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Good Lord!” Philip struck a match. “She’s absolutely lovely. Look again, my child. I was bowled over when I came into your room just now. However... I think you’re making a ghastly mistake. Sorry, darling, if I’m crude and all that. But let me know if Miss Smith is going to dine with us in time for me to look up *The Milliner’s Gazette*.”

“You absurd creature!” said Rosemary, and she went out of the library, but not back to her bedroom. She went to her writing-room and sat down at her desk. Pretty ! Absolutely lovely ! Bowled over ! Her heart beat like a heavy bell. Pretty ! Lovely ! She drew her cheque-book towards her. But no, cheques would be no use, of course. She opened a drawer and took out five pound notes, looked at them, put two back, and holding the three squeezed in her hand, she went back to her bedroom.

Half an hour later Philip was still in the library, when Rosemary came in.

"I only wanted to tell you," said she, and she leaned against the door again and looked at him with her dazzled exotic gaze, "Miss Smith won't dine with us to-night."

Philip put down the paper. "Oh, what's happened? Previous engagement? "

Rosemary came over and sat down on his knee. "She insisted on going," said she, "so I gave the poor little thing a present of money. I couldn't keep her against her will, could I? " she added softly.

Rosemary had just done her hair, darkened her eyes a little, and put on her pearls. She put up her hands and touched Philip's cheeks.

"Do you like me?" said she, and her tone, sweet, husky, troubled him.

"I like you awfully," he said, and he held her tighter. "Kiss me."

There was a pause.

Then Rosemary said dreamily. "I saw a fascinating little box to-day. It cost twenty-eight guineas. May I have it?"

Philip jumped her on his knee. "You may, little wasteful one," said he.

But that was not really what Rosemary wanted to say.

"Philip," she whispered, and she pressed his head against her bosom, "am I *pretty*?"



Let's examine the short story using our three approaches to see how we can use power relationships to explore texts.

## Marxist Questions

1. **Class Disparities:** How does the story portray the economic differences between Rosemary and the girl she meets? In what ways do Rosemary's wealth and privilege affect the dynamics between them?
2. **Commodification of Art and Luxury:** Explore the theme of consumerism and the commodification of art and luxury goods in the story. How does Rosemary's interaction with the shopkeeper reflect larger societal attitudes towards material possessions?
3. **Labor and Social Class:** Analyze the role of labor and social class in the story. How are the characters positioned in terms of social class, and how does their economic status influence their actions and relationships?
4. **Exploitation and Power Dynamics:** Discuss the power dynamics between Rosemary and the girl she meets. How does Rosemary's offer to take the girl home reflect underlying structures of power and privilege? In what ways does Rosemary's benevolence reinforce or challenge existing social hierarchies?
5. **Alienation and Isolation:** Explore the theme of alienation and isolation, considering both Rosemary's privileged but potentially lonely existence and the girl's apparent vulnerability. How do these characters experience and navigate their respective social environments?

Remember, Marxism often focuses on economic and social structures, so consider how these structures are reflected in the characters' relationships, choices, and the overall narrative.

**Example of Marxist thesis statement:** In “A Cup of Tea” by Katherine Mansfield, the exploitation of a poor girl by a wealthy woman reveals the way in which socioeconomic status keeps the bourgeoisie from being able to act morally toward those of a different social class. Even when she thinks she means well, Rosemary cannot escape the transactional consumerism that defines her existence.

## Postcolonial Questions

Next, let’s explore the story through a postcolonial lens.

1. **Colonial Influence on Aesthetics:** How does Rosemary’s fascination with the little box and her interactions with the shopkeeper reflect colonial influences on aesthetics? Consider Mansfield’s own background and how colonialism might have shaped perceptions of beauty and value.
2. **Othering and Exoticism:** Analyze the theme of othering and exoticism in the story, particularly in Rosemary’s interactions with the shopkeeper and her decision to bring the girl home. How does Mansfield’s own experiences and relationships contribute to or challenge the portrayal of the “exotic” other?
3. **Representation of Indigenous Culture:** Explore the representation of indigenous culture in the story, considering Mansfield’s own connection with Maori

culture. How does the story depict or neglect aspects of indigenous identity, and in what ways might it reflect the author's relationship with New Zealand's cultural landscape?

4. **Cultural Appropriation and Power Dynamics:** Discuss the power dynamics and potential cultural appropriation in Rosemary's actions. How might Mansfield's personal experiences inform our understanding of the power imbalances present in the story, especially in the context of colonial history?
5. **Postcolonial Feminism:** Investigate the intersectionality of postcolonial feminism in the story, taking into account Mansfield's own experiences. How do issues of gender, race, and colonialism intersect, and what insights can be gained by examining the characters and their relationships through this lens?

Consider how Mansfield's background and experiences as a person from New Zealand might have influenced her perspectives on colonialism, indigenous cultures, and power dynamics. This lens can provide valuable insights into the story's underlying themes and messages.

**Example of a postcolonial thesis statement:**

Katherine Mansfield, a New Zealand modernist author who was the product of British imperialism, once loved an indigenous Māori woman, but set her aside for a life among London's literati. Mansfield's 1921 short story "A Cup of Tea" reveals the inescapable influence of colonial power structures through Rosemary's obsession with a costly foreign

trinket and the girl's equation of her worth with a cup of tea, which serves as a symbol for the carelessness with which Mansfield and her peers treated indigenous lives and culture.

## Ethnic Studies Questions

Finally, how could we approach this story from an ethnic studies lens? As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, ethnic studies, not postcolonial studies, is the critical approach used for American authors who are not white. As Christine MacLeod observes regarding the divide between postcolonial and African American studies, “the fact remains that with neither a territorial identity nor physical separation from the metropolitan centre, black American cannot strictly be said to fit any standard model of the colonial or postcolonial experience” (p. 51).

Because Katherine Mansfield is a New Zealand author and part of the British colonial structure, we would probably use a postcolonial rather than an ethnic studies lens to analyze her work. One subset of ethnic studies, Indigenous studies, might apply. Indigenous studies are often used to consider how texts function in a dominant culture. The Māori are the Indigenous people of New Zealand. For Māori studies, we could explore the story using the traditional knowledge, culture, knowledge, and beliefs of Māori and Indigenous peoples. “A Cup of Tea” does not feature any Māori characters, so an ethnic studies approach would focus on the absence of Māori culture and the way that

the dominant culture has replaced the traditional Indigenous one.

A better Mansfield short story to use for an ethnic studies approach would be “How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped.” In this short story, written in 1912, Mansfield relates the story of a young white girl who follows two Māori women to their settlement, where they feed her and take her to the ocean to play. The story ends with white policemen “rescuing” Pearl. Because the story is told through a child’s point of view, ultimately, the nature of the kidnapping is ambiguous. She goes willingly with the Māori women but resists the white policemen.

You’ll notice that the questions below about “How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped” feel very similar to postcolonial criticism questions about “A Cup of Tea.”

1. How do the Māori women in the story resist colonial control and assert their agency in the face of White hegemony?
2. In what ways does the story challenge the dominant colonial narratives of New Zealand as a “settled” and “tamed” land, presenting instead a more nuanced understanding of Māori culture and resistance?
3. How does the character of Pearl Button represent the colonial gaze, and what does her fascination with the Māori women and their culture reveal about the power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized?
4. How do the Māori women use their knowledge of their environment and traditional practices to navigate and resist the colonial presence in their lives?
5. How does the ending of the story, with the Māori women watching Pearl Button’s departure, challenge the idea of colonial rescue and instead suggests the possibility of mutual understanding and solidarity between the colonized and the colonizers?

**Example of an Ethnic Studies thesis statement:**

“In the context of their original publication, Mansfield’s Rhythm writings reveal the author’s ambivalent relationship to metropolitan primitivism—ranging from romantic idealization of the Māoris in ‘How Pearl Button was Kidnapped’ to satirical mockery of the western European fascination with exotic cultures and artifacts in ‘Sunday Lunch,’ a sketch prefiguring the themes of Mansfield’s later story ‘Bliss’ (1918). Yet while these writings largely frustrate metropolitan desires for quaint exoticism, I argue that as a Pākehā New Zealander with a penchant for cultural cross-dressing (both in life and in print), Mansfield did not fully escape the dynamics she ridiculed.” (Snyder 139).

*Note: “Pākehā is a word for a white New Zealander.*

## **The Limitations of Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism**

While Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies approaches can provide valuable insights into literary texts, each approach has its limitations.

- **Marxist Criticism:**

- **Economic Determinism:** Marxist criticism can sometimes oversimplify complex human motivations by reducing them to economic factors. It may neglect the role of other aspects such as psychology, individual agency, or cultural influences.
- **Neglect of Other Power Structures:** While economic structures are central, Marxist criticism may downplay or overlook other power structures, such as those based on gender, race, or personal relationships.
- **Postcolonial Criticism:**
  - **Homogenization of Cultures:** Postcolonial criticism might risk oversimplifying diverse cultures within a colonized region, treating them as homogeneous entities. This can lead to the erasure of internal conflicts and complexities within these cultures.
  - **Western-Centric Perspectives:** There is a risk of perpetuating a Western-centric view, as postcolonial theory often originates from Western academic institutions. This may unintentionally reproduce power imbalances (the scholarship example you read identifies this limitation).
- **Ethnic Studies Criticism**
  - **Overemphasis on Identity:** Sometimes, ethnic studies can focus so much on racial, cultural, or national identities that it may overlook other important aspects of the text, such as its formal qualities, narrative structure, or thematic elements.
  - **Homogenization:** There's a risk of essentializing or homogenizing diverse experiences within a particular racial or ethnic group. For instance, if we assume that all African American experiences are the same, or all Asian American experiences are the same, we can overlook the complex and varied experiences of individuals within these groups.

- **Political and Ideological Biases:** Ethnic studies can sometimes be influenced by political or ideological biases, which might limit the scope of analysis or lead to particular interpretations being favored over others.

It's important to note that these issues don't necessarily negate the value of these approaches; however, scholars and critics should be cautious to avoid oversimplification or bias. Combining multiple critical perspectives can often provide a more comprehensive understanding of a literary text.

## Post Script: What about Critical Race Theory?

It seems like everywhere we look, we hear someone talking about Critical Race Theory. Can we apply CRT to literary texts?

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)** is one of the more well-known frameworks that can be considered under the broader lens of New Historicism. CRT examines how race and racism operate in society. It emerged in the United States in the late 1970s as a response to the limitations of traditional civil rights approaches to addressing racial inequality. CRT seeks to understand how racism and discrimination are embedded in social structures and institutions, and how they are perpetuated through everyday interactions and practices.

CRT can be defined as “a set of ideas holding that racial bias is inherent in many parts of western society, especially in its legal and social institutions, on the basis of their having been primarily designed for and implemented by white people.” (Oxford Languages). According to Mateo Castelli, “Critical Race Theory can be used to deconstruct the power dynamics that surround race and racism through everyday societal structures and institutions.”

In literature, CRT is applied to examine the ways in which



race and racism are represented and constructed in literary texts. With a CRT approach, scholars are interested in exploring how literature reflects and perpetuates racial inequality, and in how it can be used to challenge and disrupt racist ideologies and practices. CRT emphasizes the importance of examining the intersectionality of race with other forms of identity and oppression, such as gender, sexuality, class, and ability. It also emphasizes the importance of centering the perspectives and experiences of people of color in literary analysis, and in understanding how their experiences are shaped by systemic racism and discrimination.

One of the key principles of CRT is the importance of recognizing the role of power in shaping social relations and discourse. CRT seeks to examine how power operates in literary texts, and how it is used to perpetuate racial hierarchies and maintain the status quo. Literary texts may be used as artifacts to demonstrate these power structures. However, in literary studies, African American studies criticism (a subset of ethnic studies) is a more common approach.

## Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Scholars

### Marxist

- Karl Marx
- Terry Eagleton
- Antonio Gramsci

- Raymond Williams

### **Postcolonial**

- Edward Said
- Frantz Fanon
- Homi Bhabha

### **Ethnic Studies (African American/Black)**

- W.E.B. DuBois
- James Baldwin
- Amiri Baraka
- Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

### **Ethnic Studies (Chicano/a)**

- Rodolfo Acuña
- Gloria E. Anzaldúa
- Luis Leal

### **Ethnic Studies (Indigenous/First Nations)**

Wikipedia lists several important Indigenous scholars here.

### **Critical Race Theory**

- Kimberlé Crenshaw
- Derrick Bell

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## 32. Generative AI Model Essays

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to augment thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to replace thinking, we're not learning what we need to know. For this section, I have used a Marxist lens.

### AI Model Essay: Marxist Criticism

#### Love, Power, and Socioeconomic Struggle in John Donne's "The Canonization"

John Donne's poem "The Canonization" engages in a

Marxist exploration of love, power dynamics, and socioeconomic struggles. The poem portrays a speaker pleading with an unnamed authority to allow them to love freely, challenging conventional expectations tied to wealth, social status, and power. The central argument revolves around the disruptive potential of love, which transcends societal norms and hierarchical structures, posing a threat to established power dynamics.

The poem begins with a command, “For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,” immediately setting the tone for a confrontation between the speaker and an external authority. The speaker acknowledges the constraints imposed by societal expectations, referencing ailments such as palsy, gout, and financial ruin. These references highlight the physical and economic challenges tied to the speaker’s love, suggesting a conflict between personal desires and the oppressive forces of socioeconomic norms.

Donne uses vivid imagery to portray the impact of the speaker’s love, asking who has been harmed by it. The rhetorical questions challenge the notion that personal affections can have a detrimental effect on society or the powers that be. The poem further emphasizes the unity of the lovers, presenting them as a single entity despite societal attempts to classify and separate them. The reference to the phoenix riddle reinforces the idea that their love is mysterious and transformative, challenging established norms.

The concluding lines of the poem introduce the concept of canonization, presenting the lovers as figures worthy of reverence and recognition. By

invoking the imagery of tombs, hearse, and chronicles, Donne suggests that their love story, though deemed unfit for traditional societal structures, will find its place in poetry and verse. The act of building “pretty rooms” through sonnets implies a defiance of traditional monuments, creating a narrative that challenges and transcends societal expectations.

In conclusion, “The Canonization” reflects a Marxist interrogation of power, socioeconomic struggle, and the disruptive potential of love. Donne’s portrayal of the lovers as defiant figures, resisting societal norms, provides a lens through which to examine the intersection of personal desire and broader power structures. The poem invites readers to consider the subversive nature of love and its ability to challenge and redefine established hierarchies.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/6faeb310-f31d-400b-922e-bea993c5cc78>

## Annotations: Love, Power, and Socioeconomic Struggle in John Donne’s “The Canonization”

John Donne’s poem “The Canonization” engages in a **Marxist** exploration of love, **power dynamics**, and **socioeconomic struggles**. The poem portrays a speaker pleading with an unnamed **authority** to allow them to love freely, challenging conventional expectations tied to **wealth, social status, and power**. The central argument revolves around the **disruptive potential** of love, which transcends **societal norms** and

**hierarchical structures**, posing a threat to established **power dynamics**. I don't think the first sentence makes sense. The poem does not engage in a Marxist exploration; however, we as critics can definitely engage in a Marxist exploration, and I think this poem is an especially interesting one for this type of approach because we know that part of the objection to Donne's marriage was an economic one. Remember that as with New Historicism, with Marxist criticism, we need to know something about the time period when John Donne lived and about the circumstances surrounding the marriage. As a result of his secret marriage to Ann More, Donne lost his job as Sir Thomas Egerton's secretary. His father-in-law sought to have the marriage annulled because he did not think Donne was a suitable spouse for his daughter. Knowing these things about the poem's context is important to a Marxist critique. A better thesis statement might acknowledge this historical context: Written within the context of Donne's own marriage to a much-younger woman from a different socioeconomic class, "The Canonization" mocks the conventions of social hierarchies enforced by the bourgeoisie in 17th century England.

The poem begins with a command, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," immediately setting the tone for a **confrontation** between the speaker and an **external authority**. The speaker acknowledges the constraints imposed by **societal expectations**, referencing ailments such as palsy, gout, and **financial ruin**. These references highlight the physical and **economic challenges** tied to the speaker's love, suggesting a conflict between personal desires and the **oppressive forces of socioeconomic norms**. The point about the poem's commanding and powerful tone is a good one to make in a Marxist critique. The speaker does not have the power in this relationship, but argues from a place of superiority, using the extended metaphor of religion as his justification. I would focus more on financial ruin and the historical circumstances of Donne's loss of employment here. I would also focus on the



oppressive forces here, introducing more information about social classes in 17th century England. Literary scholar Judith Anderson points out that "in Donne's instance, evident in any reasonably informed reading of "The Canonization," this real world includes the Tudor-Stuart court, the Reformation, Donne's coterie readers, and his own biography, all concerns with which his poetry is infused and which close reading discovers...."The Canonization" is a situated utterance that is saturated in its culture, and a close reading of this poem opens up a wider, deeper awareness of its situatedness in real time" (159, 164).

Donne uses vivid imagery to portray the impact of the speaker's love, asking who has been harmed by it. The rhetorical questions **challenge** the notion that personal affections can have a detrimental effect on society or the powers that be. The poem further emphasizes the unity of the lovers, presenting them as a single entity despite societal attempts to **classify and separate** them. The reference to the phoenix riddle reinforces the idea that their love is mysterious and transformative, challenging established norms. **This paragraph feels more like New Criticism than Marxist criticism to me. I would look at the phoenix as a warning to the capitalists that the people will "burn it all down" and make a new world if their needs are not acknowledged and addressed.**

The concluding lines of the poem introduce the concept of canonization, presenting the lovers as figures worthy of reverence and recognition. By invoking the imagery of tombs, hearse, and chronicles, Donne suggests that their love story, though deemed unfit for **traditional societal structures**, will find its place in poetry and verse. The act of building "pretty rooms" through sonnets implies a defiance of traditional monuments, creating a narrative that challenges and transcends societal expectations. **Again, this is pretty weak. The idea of canonization and religion itself is an important concept in Marxist criticism. Any reference to organized religion within**

this type of criticism would be viewed as a tool the bourgeoisie are using to control the masses, and thus, the references to canonization and sainthood should be used in this context, to argue that the poem's speaker is begging to be accepted by the bourgeoisie rather than attempting to subvert existing power structures.

In conclusion, "The Canonization" reflects a Marxist interrogation of power, socioeconomic struggle, and the disruptive potential of love. Donne's portrayal of the lovers as defiant figures, resisting societal norms, provides a lens through which to examine the intersection of personal desire and broader power structures. The poem invites readers to consider the subversive nature of love and its ability to challenge and redefine established hierarchies. I like the first sentence here. It's the closest thing to an actual thesis statement that I saw in this paper. But I think there's a much more interesting argument to be made by looking at both the historical context and the central extended metaphor of religious canonization from a Marxist viewpoint.

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## You Try It!

Choose one of your favorite poems. Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that applies one of the theories we studied in this section to the poem you chose. Then analyze the AI-generated essay. Is the theory correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses this psychological theory and the text you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

## 33. Student Example: Marxist Criticism

The following student essay example of Marxist Criticism is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses Raymond Carver's short story, "A Small, Good Thing."

### **"A Small, Good Thing" by Raymond Carver and the 1980s AIDS Epidemic**

*By Jasper Chappel*

Raymond Carver's short story "A Small, Good Thing" was published in 1983, in his collection *Cathedral*. In 1983 in the United States, the AIDS epidemic was barely beginning to be understood by the CDC and the general public. Under President Ronald Reagan since 1981, anti-communist and pro-capitalist sentiment was expected of Americans because of tense relations with the USSR. This political climate informed Carver's writing of "A Small, Good Thing," and the previous version of the same story published in 1981, titled "The Bath;" Carver's personal life partially influenced the drastic changes between each story, and so did the emerging political tensions caused by the AIDS epidemic and relations with the USSR. "A Small, Good Thing," despite being written in a turbulent time, encourages people to value each other, put less trust in institutions such as government and healthcare, and ultimately come together in times of hardship.

The baker is a criticism of capitalism and excessive labor with unfair pay. He has lost part of his humanity to his work,

because maintaining financial security is a more immediate concern than forming relationships; he and other unnamed employees represent the proletariat. His behavior throughout the story shows his lack of feeling towards other people, and at the end, he admits as much, saying, "I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else... [M]aybe years ago I was a different kind of human being" (page 26). Industry has forced the characters to lose their individuality – none of the nurses are named or physically distinguishable from each other, and they do not offer Ann and Howard comfort or answers. When asked questions about Scotty's condition, they simply say, "Doctor Francis will be here in a few minutes," (page 6). Doctor Francis has reached a high enough class that he can retain some humanity while still doing his job, which is why he is afforded a name. However, he is nearing the status of the bourgeoisie, which is ultimately why he fails to give Scotty the correct diagnosis and treatment. He and Howard are somewhat similar in this regard; because Howard has the privilege to leave his job in the middle of a work day, and for an indefinite amount of time when Scotty is hospitalized, the audience can assume Howard is nearing a high-class position. He is not expendable, like a nurse or a baker would be.

Ann appears to be a full-time mom, and while this is unpaid labor, the reader is led to understand her emotions the most because she retains the most humanity in her job; she simply has the privilege to not work for a company. Her trade is motherhood, and when this is stripped from her, she feels more aimless than the others; just like if the nurse or the baker lost their positions, Ann forms her identity around the job of being a mom. The difference is that it is her job to empathize with others, to care for others, and she can find another niche to fill without sending in an application first. Her grief manifests in being unable to care for her son, despite her skills; she knows Scotty is in a coma and that something has gone

horribly wrong, but because the bourgeoisie does not value self-employed, unpaid labor, her concerns are brushed aside.

From one perspective, Ann benefits from being a mother. From another, her characterization has reduced her to being only a mother. The only outside information we have for another main character is what Howard and the baker tell us about their lives. While Howard is driving home from the hospital, he reflects on his life and his good fortune, or his privilege. Ann does not do the same – the audience is unsure of whether Ann thinks the marriage is successful, if she went to college, or if she gave anything up to become a mother. She is only a mother and wife – a loving one, but a one-dimensional character. It seems that Ann is defined only by the fact she has a son. Ann's designated role to help the men in the story remember their humanity is a stereotypically feminine role that is largely informed by Raymond Carver's identity and life experiences, but is also in line with the idea that motherhood is a full-time job unrecognized by capitalism.

The bourgeoisie in this story are best represented by the hospital and doctor, and the situation with Scotty exposes the flawed system the proletariat have to live under. Scotty represents its most vulnerable victims, and the family Ann meets in the lobby of the hospital represents how tragedy can touch all our lives regardless of class or race. Ann and Howard learn through the events of the story, despite being middle-class and white, that certain tragedies touch all lives; this is a translation of the AIDS epidemic into literature. Disease does not discriminate based off class, sexuality, or race, but institutions and governments do.

Scotty has no speaking lines—the narrator only supplies information on what he saying, so the audience doesn't have access to his exact words. All we know about him is that he probably likes aliens, has one friend he used to walk to school with, and “howls” before he dies, a very inhuman noise. Even though the story revolves around his injury, he only serves as

a character who affects other characters. His injury allows the audience to see the contrast between employees who take care of people as a job, and people who take care of others free from industry interference. He also serves to bring the baker and Ann together; the baker needed to be reminded of his humanity and have a reason to turn his back on the capitalist system for a while. Ann is the most likely character to help him reconnect with his humanity, and in her grief she is more human than any other character. Although Howard also shows his humanity in his grief, it is Ann who helps him along, "'There, there,' she said tenderly. 'Howard, he's gone. He's gone now and we'll have to get used to that. To being alone'" (page 22). When Scotty's death makes his parents feel alienated, just as capitalism alienates people from each other to prevent an uprising, they start to accept this; then the baker calls again, and Ann's anger at his behavior pushes them into action, and eventually reconciliation and comfort.

When Ann encounters the black family in the waiting room, they serve as a mirror for her situation, and represent understanding each other's humanity despite differences. There is a previous version of this short story called "The Bath," which does not specify the race of the family, does not include the two dark-skinned orderlies, and lacks the reconciliation with the baker. Part of the fear around AIDS was due to the uncertainty about how it spread, but there was also an element of stigma around African-American populations and their inaccurate image in the media as drug users (therefore, re-use needles and spread AIDS). Early on, it became clear that AIDS was spreading through bodily fluids, but more information than that tended to be conflicting.

In 1985, according to the article "Save Our Kids, Keep AIDS Out" by Jennifer Brier, black and white families would unite in Queens to protest the CDC regulations stating that children diagnosed with AIDS should be allowed in public schools. We can see this sentiment represented before this occurrence in

Ann's desire to connect with the black family in the waiting room. Just like the mothers in the article fear their children being exposed to AIDS at school, a hospital must have been a nightmare for a mother in this time period. Seeing Scotty have his blood drawn, and other needles inserted into his veins, probably caused her panic each time; not only because his condition was not improving, but also for the risk of contracting AIDS the longer he stayed in the hospital. Scotty's hospital stay can be considered a metaphor for how AIDS was considered during the time of publication. It comes out of nowhere, just like the car that hit Scotty, then disappeared without a trace. Those who are hit seem fine at first, but progressively, their condition declines. The doctors and nurses do not know enough about the disease, and sometimes, their intuition is wrong, causing tragic deaths. The message the audience is left with is this: a mother knows best for her child. This is echoed in the later movement in Queens, "Thus, parents and local communities, not a dishonest city bureaucracy or out-of-touch scientific establishment, were better able to make decisions about local children" (Brier 4).

In "A Small, Good Thing," instead of exploiting the fear people had around the AIDS epidemic, Carver encourages people to find common ground and come together. Doctor Francis expresses his regrets in not being able to save Scotty, the family in the waiting room symbolizes connecting with each other despite differences, and the baker is able to acknowledge his loss of humanity over the years after witnessing Ann and Howard's grief. This short story is a touching addition to the literary time period, and handles each political undertone with care and empathy.

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# 34. Practicing Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism

For this week's assignment, we will be revisiting three texts that we used for our first essay. Please choose a different poem from the one you chose for your essay. In addition to choosing a poem, you'll also need to decide on the critical approach you want to use: Marxist, postcolonial, or ethnic studies criticism. You will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using one of these methods. I have not included guiding questions in this chapter; instead, refer to the questions posted below "A Cup of Tea" to guide you in the critical approach you choose. Write your response as a short essay (500-750 words). You will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text that reflects the critical method you chose. Post your short essay as a response to the Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies theoretical response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

## 1. American Income

BY AFAA MICHAEL WEAVER

The survey says all groups can make more money  
if they lose weight except black men...men of other colors  
and women of all colors have more gold, but black men

are the summary of weight, a lead thick thing on the scales,  
meters spinning until they ring off the end of the numbering  
of accumulation, how things grow heavy, fish on the  
ends of lines that become whales, then prehistoric sea life  
beyond all memories, the billion days of human hands  
working, doing all the labor one can imagine, hands  
now the population of cactus leaves on a papyrus moon  
waiting for the fire, the notes from all their singing gone  
up into the salt breath of tears of children that dry, rise  
up to be the crystalline canopy of promises, the infinite  
gone fishing days with the apologies for not being able to love  
anymore, gone down inside earth somewhere where  
women make no demands, have fewer dreams of forever,  
these feet that marched and ran and got cut off, these hearts  
torn out of chests by nameless thieves, this thrashing  
until the chaff is gone out and black men know the gold  
of being the dead center of things, where pain is the gateway  
to Jerusalems, Bodhi trees, places for meditation and howling,  
keeping the weeping heads of gods in their eyes.

From <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/49296/american-income>

## 2. Object Permanence

BY ALISON C. ROLLINS

For the time being  
an ampersand is a boy  
clutching his knees  
to his chest as art.  
On high, the god of form  
wears a face on each wrist.  
Only a god can take and give  
time, *but the one in front of*

*the gun lasts forever.*

The boy is parenthesis,  
his shoulders curved,

the huddled wings of a bird.

The boy's arms are too short  
to box with god. He breaks down-

beats of sweat in his sleep.

If life is music, the rest is noise,  
this earth a museum of dead boys  
walking. The god has a finger to

his lips. He wakes to the boy  
taking selfies with *The Scream*.  
The boy knows a picture

will only last longer.

Frequent warnings read  
*Storage Almost Full* across his  
screen so self-portraits he

outsources to the cloud.

*As I Lay Dying* sits in his book  
bag. The page dog-eared that has  
the line: *My mother is a fish.*

.

Right now  
the comma

is a lobe.

From afar the god clutches  
his head, in an effort

to cover missing ears.

The redbone boy was airborne.  
As we speak, he bleeds in the street.

The backpack has landed as parachute.

The god yowls watercolors,  
the way the sky weeps  
oranges in lung-shaped  
segments of grief:

quarter, half, a whole.

A bullet is a form of punctuation.  
From a distance it appears  
the boy is fucking up commas.

Roger that.

The god of variables — a-  
bridged & for-  
lorn, dribbles mercy  
on the mother of

the slain.

The boy's headphones skip  
down the sidewalk in the hands

of another mother's child.

The skeletal god's got bars.  
A rib cage full of tally marks  
collection plates in memory

of chicken-scratched bones.

The writing on god's wall  
was formerly known as art.

.

The boy's chest has become  
a focal point. It rests in  
his mother's arms, a still life painting.

The god is MIA.

The boy's mother repeats her prayers

again, & again, & again, & again, & again.

Repetition leads to the longing for a god,  
for a sound as signal, for the absence of a note

or limb. Think of the bo(d)y as con artist.

The boy's mother knows a period is  
something missed. She knows objects  
can disappear behind a god's back  
but that doesn't mean they are gone forever.

|

She holds the boy's cracked  
phone in her hands, as if it were

the whole world.

A boy is what he leaves behind.  
What a mother struggles to forget  
her muscles store as memory.

### 3. Mother's Dirge

BY DUY DOAN

Because our family is from the countryside,  
Your father liked falling from high places.  
Limber feet make expert tree climbers.

The coconut — meat for eating, fiber for the buttonmaker.

Your father liked falling from high places.  
Upon landing, he smiles. I carry my share.  
The coconut — meat for eating, fiber for the buttonmaker.

Where the bend in the trunk begins matters most.

Upon landing, he smiles. I carry my share.  
Husband and wife walk home, avoiding rice paddies.  
Where the bend in the trunk begins matters most.

Even if they are full, trees that stand straight: avoid climbing.

Husband and wife walk home, avoiding rice paddies.

Your grandmother warned me many times over.

Even if they are full, trees that stand straight: avoid climbing.

But we were young, the city called to us like a wilderness.

Your grandmother warned me many times over.

Saigon is big, too busy, lacking decency.

But we were young, the city called to us like a wilderness.

The day he died, the sun heated the cement too hot for bare feet.

Saigon is big, too busy, lacking decency.

Afterwards, home brought no comfort.

The day he died, the sun heated the cement too hot for bare feet.

The New World Hotel stands fourteen stories.

Afterwards, home brought no comfort,

Because tragedy cannot save face.

The New World Hotel stands fourteen stories.

Everyone here must remember my new dress last fall,

Because tragedy cannot save face.

Our neighbors recount our tale with great skill and detail.

Everyone here must remember my new dress last fall.

With the white of his palms alone, your father made us a living.

Our neighbors recount our tale with great skill and detail.

The palm trees out front aren't tall enough.

With the white of his palms alone, your father made us a living.

Even when we were promised, I could see he had ability.

The palm trees out front aren't tall enough.

Mind your father, improve yourself, head upwards.

Even when we were promised, I could see he had ability.

He climbed until he got us to the city.

Mind your father, improve yourself, head upwards.

Limber feet make expert tree climbers.

Because our family is from the countryside,

He climbed until he got us to the city.

Source: *Poetry* (October 2017)



# Theoretical Response Assignment

## Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.

## Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called "Practicing [Theoretical Approach]." (For example, "Practicing New Criticism") Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.

**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you've chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this

assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*

# 35. Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=497#oembed-1>*

## Slide One: Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies

Welcome! I'm Dr. Liza Long. In this presentation for English 211, we will learn more about Marxist, Postcolonial, and ethnic studies approaches to texts. Marxist criticism predates some of the other critical methods we have studied, including New Criticism, and it was influential in the development of New Historicism. Postcolonial and ethnic studies criticism both developed from New Historicism, an approach based on the idea that there are no stable facts in history, and that history, like any text, can be deconstructed. These three types of analysis share a common target: power. However, they explore

the way that power operates in the creation and consumption of texts in different ways.

Ultimately, these approaches believe that all literature is inherently political. With these forms of criticism, we will look at the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures, or higher and lower socioeconomic classes. We will also explore the role that dominant cultures and racist systems can play in creating, disseminating, and consuming literary texts. When we look at the role of race and racist systems, we are engaging in a form of cultural studies called critical race theory. These three approaches to texts—Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies criticism—remain relevant in literary scholarship today. If you go on to study literature, you'll likely encounter entire courses devoted to just one of these approaches to texts.

In our next few slides, I will present some key terms and some questions you can ask as you use these approaches in literary criticism. Again, remember that this section is a brief survey of these methods. Any one of them could be the work of a scholar's lifetime! But these approaches can help us to ask interesting questions about literary texts and the role they play in culture and society.

## Slide Two: Marxist Criticism

Marxist criticism grew out of the philosophical and economic works of Karl Marx, a nineteenth century German philosopher and economist who was influenced by Friedrich Engels. These are not the only terms associated with Marxism, but they are ones we commonly encounter in Marxist literary criticism.

**Alienation:** this is a process that makes a worker feel like the work or products he makes are foreign, even though he or she created them. It's more than just a feeling though: in Marx's theory, alienation is an objective fact of a capitalist society, and without this separation, capitalism can't function.

**Base:** This is sometimes also referred to as the substructure, which is the opposite of the superstructure. The base includes both the means of production and the division of labor, or working conditions.

**Bourgeoisie:** This is Marx's term for the ruling class, who own the means of production. It came through French from ancient Latin (the word for castle is *burgus*) and is associated with property ownership.

**Class:** In Marx's theories, social class plays a central role. The hierarchy of classes is determined by individual people's roles in the production process. People in the same class share economic interests and have antagonism toward people in other classes (which are described as class struggles). Evidence of class struggles is one thing we look for in a Marxist critical approach to texts.

**Commodity:** This is any good or service produced by workers that can be bought and sold for money.

**Dominant ideology** is a means of social control that shapes the attitudes, beliefs, values, and morals shared by most of the people in a given society.

**Proletariat:** this is the social class comprised of laborers. Their ability to work is their only main economic possession. Workers are viewed as an exploited class in Marxist theory who labor under unfair conditions that benefit the bourgeoisie.

**Subaltern:** This word was coined by the Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci and is used to describe peasants or other people who are subject to the ruling class. The word is also used in Postcolonial criticism.

**Superstructure:** the laws, politics, religion, family, and cultural structures (including literature) that reinforce and legitimize the power of the ruling class.

Some questions we might ask when using a Marxist approach include the following:

- How is socioeconomic class represented in the text, and

does the author include any analysis of class relations?

- Do you see a complete picture of the society, or are some classes excluded from the text?
- Does class status restrict or empower the characters in the text? How do the characters experience or overcome oppression?
- How does the text show class struggle, or how does class contribute to conflict in the text? Are social conflicts ignored, or is the blame placed elsewhere?
- How does the text depict the relationship between the individual and the state? Does the state view individuals as a means of production, or as ends in themselves?
- Does the work offer a utopian ideal as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?
- How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (included repressive ideologies)? If a work criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have Marxist agenda.

Think about the major works we are reading in this class. How does a Marxist approach apply to these works? Can you find evidence of class and class struggles?

## Slide Three: Postcolonial Criticism

Postcolonial criticism is also concerned with power, social class, and dominant cultures, but this approach focuses on Western Imperialism and its effects around the globe. It should be noted that the “post” in postcolonial criticism functions the same way that the “post” in post-structuralism works—to indicate

that we are deconstructing the effects of colonization—we are “decolonizing” the text.

### **Terms to Use**

**Colonialism:** the practice of domination by a foreign power over people for an extended period (including exploitation of people and resources).

**Postcolonialism:** the academic study of the cultural, political, and economic legacy of colonialism and imperialism. It focuses on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands.

**Ambivalence:** the ambiguous way in which the colonizer and the colonized regard each other. It's characterized by a complex mix of attraction and repulsion.

**Diaspora:** The original meaning of this term is “The dispersion of Jews outside of Israel from the sixth century B.C., when they were exiled to Babylonia, until the present time;” In postcolonial studies, we extend this to mean a dispersion of a people from their original homeland. It can also mean the community formed by such a people; or a dispersion of an originally homogeneous entity, such as a language or culture.

**Ethnicity:** an attitude of one group of people toward other group of people on the basis of different cultural values or religious values.

**Decolonization:** the process of dismantling colonialist power in all its forms.

**Orientalism:** way of seeing the East, especially the Middle East, in a negative light. It's a Western tradition that was shaped by the cultural attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism* was foundational in establishing this concept as well as pioneering postcolonial approaches to texts.

**Hegemony:** the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all (different from political power). This is achieved through economic and political control, control of education and media, and the

consent of dominated people/groups. Example: influencers on social media

**Hierarchy:** a critical description of global coexistence that is centered on the concentration of power, rather than striving for a more equal distribution of power. Generally, lighter skinned people are associated with power.

**Hybridity:** an important concept in post-colonial theory, referring to the integration (or, mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures

**Imperialism:** ideology that promotes the belief that one group of people or nation is superior to others.

**Mimicry:** practice of colonized people adopting the customs, techniques, and language of the colonizer.

**The “Other”:** in postcolonial studies, this term refers to colonized people who are defined by their differences from the colonizers.

**Resistance:** Postcolonial theory is built around the concept of resistance. It establishes intellectual spaces for subaltern peoples to speak for themselves. It also struggles for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy.

Some questions we might ask when using a postcolonial approach include the following:

- Where and when is the work set? Is it in a colony, a former colony, or a country that has gained its independence from Great Britain, Spain, France, etc.?
- How does the text depict interactions and relationships between colonizers and the colonized?
- How does the text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression? Think about language, communication, and knowledge in colonized countries.
- What principles of colonialism do you see in the text? For example, do you see colonial powers take land, exploit the economy or environment, or enslave the indigenous



population?

- How do the colonial conflicts and politics of the text affect its meaning?
- Are there similarities among the literatures of different postcolonial populations?

## Slide Four: Ethnic Studies

If Ethnic Studies feels like a broad category, that's because it is. Within the broad umbrella of ethnic studies, we find further specializations including African American or Black studies, Chicano/a studies, and Indigenous studies. The common factor in these approaches is the focus on power. With all types of ethnic studies, there's considerable overlap among the disciplines of history, literature, anthropology, sociology, and political science.

The scholarship example I chose for you to read is an excerpt from an article by African American studies scholar Martha Biondi, which traces the history and considers the future of the field. Biondi's article provides perspectives from a variety of scholars and also introduces you to the concept of Afrocentricity, which places African knowledge systems at the center of literary analysis.

The terminology we use for Ethnic Studies is often specific to the subfield. Here are some terms you might encounter (again, notice the overlaps with postcolonial criticism):

**Afrocentricity:** Academic theory that centers African knowledge in examining historical and cultural contexts for literary texts.

**Colonialism:** the practice of domination by a foreign power over people for an extended period (including exploitation of people and resources)

**Decolonization:** The process of undoing the effects of colonization, including reclaiming indigenous knowledge,

promoting cultural revitalization, and challenging the dominant narratives and structures imposed by colonizers

**Ethnicity:** A socially constructed category that groups people based on shared cultural, linguistic, or national characteristics.

**Hybridity:** The mixing or blending of different cultural elements, often used to describe the complex cultural identities that arise from the intersection of multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds.

**Identity Politics:** A political approach that focuses on the experiences and perspectives of specific identity groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or women, to address issues of inequality and social justice.

**Intersectionality:** A concept that recognizes the complex and interconnected nature of social identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Intersectionality highlights the ways in which multiple forms of oppression can intersect and compound to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities.

**Mestizaje:** A concept used in Latin American and Chicano/a studies to describe the mixing or blending of indigenous and European cultures, often emphasizing the resilience and creativity of mixed-race populations.

**Othering:** The process of defining oneself or one's group in opposition to an imagined or constructed "Other," often used to justify discrimination, exclusion, or marginalization.

**Postcolonialism:** the academic study of the cultural, political, and economic legacy of colonialism and imperialism. It focuses on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands.

**Racialization:** The process by which individuals or groups are assigned racial identities and subjected to racial discrimination based on perceived racial characteristics.

The questions we ask about a text using this approach will depend on the particular branch of ethnic studies we are using. However, here are some broad guiding questions:

- **Whose Voices are Represented, and Whose are Silenced?:** What ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds are depicted in the text? How are marginalized voices, identities, and experiences represented or overlooked?
- **How are Stereotypes Challenged or Reinforced?:** What stereotypes about ethnic and racial groups are present in the text, and how are they depicted? Are these stereotypes challenged or reinforced by the narrative and characters?
- **What are the Power Dynamics?:** How are power dynamics related to race, ethnicity, and culture portrayed in the text? Who has power and authority, and how is this power exercised?
- **What is the Role of Cultural Values and Traditions?:** How are cultural values, traditions, and practices portrayed in the text? Are they presented positively, negatively, or neutrally? How do they influence characters' actions and beliefs?
- **How are Colonial and Postcolonial Themes Addressed?:** How does the text address themes of colonization, imperialism, and resistance? How are the legacies of colonialism and the impacts of postcolonialism portrayed?

## Slide Five: Critical Race Theory

I'm including a brief postscript about Critical Race Theory because it's a part of the discourse right now. This is probably a good time to remind you that I am not endorsing any of these critical methods; I am just introducing you to them as critical approaches to analyzing literary texts. Like our previous three approaches, CRT also focuses on power. Critical Race Theory can be defined as "a set of ideas holding that racial bias is inherent in many parts of western society, especially in its legal and social institutions, on the basis of their having been

primarily designed for and implemented by white people.” (Oxford Languages). According to Mateo Castelli, “Critical Race Theory can be used to deconstruct the power dynamics that surround race and racism through everyday societal structures and institutions.”

Some of the terms used in CRT overlap with other critical methods in this section.

**Social construct:** an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society. In Critical Race Theory, race is a social construct that is not supported by biological reality.

**Disparity:** the idea that people are treated differently because of their race

**Discrimination:** Discrimination is the process of making unfair or prejudicial distinctions between people based on groups, classes, or other categories. Critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic argue that anti-discrimination law has blindspots for non-black minorities because its language is confined within the black–white binary.

**Equity:** “the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair.”

**Marginalization:** the process of putting someone in a powerless or unimportant position within a society or group. It can also be used as a verb to describe the casting aside of groups that are considered “other” within society.

**Counter-Storytelling:** A process that is used to amplify and share the stories, experiences, narratives, and truths of marginalized people.

**Standpoint Theory:** an individual's perspectives are shaped by their social and political experiences.

**Intersectionality:** the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. (Oxford Languages)

## Slide Six: Applying Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism

Let's consider these approaches with our text for this section, "A Cup of Tea" by early twentieth century New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield. As with New Historicism, we need to know something about the author and her context before we can apply these approaches. Let's ask ourselves these questions?

- Who was the author? When did she write? What were the dominant power structures like at that time? A quick Google search will tell you that Katherine Mansfield lived at the height of the British Empire. She also wrote during the time period when Marxist ideologies were increasingly prevalent in politics—the Russian revolution of 1917 being perhaps the most prominent example.
- See the examples in our textbook for three different approaches exploring power in this text.
- To use these methods, make an argument about the text that includes and considers power. For a Marxist argument, look at social class. Consider Rosemary and the girl she brings home. For postcolonial, you could look at the author as a colonizer, or you could look for evidence of colonization in the text—and you don't have to look far. The title contains one of the chief reasons for colonization: tea. What has tea become in this text? This particular story does not work as well with an ethnic studies approach. You could consider how the indigenous Māori culture is excluded from the narrative and also consider Mansfield's romantic relationship with a Māori woman, Maata Mahupuku. But I've provided a link to another short story by Mansfield, "How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped," that deals explicitly with the Māori culture, showing the "otherness" of the white settlers to the indigenous people

through the eyes of a white child who feels more comfortable with the Māoris than with whites.

## Slide Seven: Limitations

While Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies approaches can provide valuable insights into literary texts, each approach has its limitations.

### 1. **Marxist Criticism:**

- **Economic Determinism:** Marxist criticism can sometimes oversimplify complex human motivations by reducing them to economic factors. It may neglect the role of other aspects such as psychology, individual agency, or cultural influences.
- **Neglect of Other Power Structures:** While economic structures are central, Marxist criticism may downplay or overlook other power structures, such as those based on gender, race, or personal relationships.

### 2. **Postcolonial Criticism:**

- **Homogenization of Cultures:** Postcolonial criticism might risk oversimplifying diverse cultures within a colonized region, treating them as homogeneous entities. This can lead to the erasure of internal conflicts and complexities within these cultures.
- **Western-Centric Perspectives:** There is a risk of perpetuating a Western-centric view, as postcolonial theory often originates from Western academic institutions. This may unintentionally reproduce power imbalances (the scholarship example you read identifies this limitation).

### 3. Ethnic Studies Criticism

- **Overemphasis on Identity:** Sometimes, ethnic studies can focus so much on racial, cultural, or national identities that it may overlook other important aspects of the text, such as its formal qualities, narrative structure, or thematic elements.
- **Homogenization:** There's a risk of essentializing or homogenizing diverse experiences within a particular racial or ethnic group. For instance, if we assume that all African American experiences are the same, or all Asian American experiences are the same, we can overlook the complex and varied experiences of individuals within these groups.
- **Political and Ideological Biases:** Ethnic studies can sometimes be influenced by political or ideological biases, which might limit the scope of analysis or lead to particular interpretations being favored over others.

While many scholars who engage in ethnic studies criticism identify with the ethnicity they study, this is not universal. Martha Biondi, for example, is a white woman who specializes in African American studies. However, Critical Race Theory may have additional limitations in its focus on race as well as pedagogical challenges because it centers lived experience, and not all students have this. It's important to note that these issues don't necessarily negate the value of these approaches; however, we should try to avoid oversimplification or bias. Combining multiple critical perspectives can often provide a more comprehensive understanding of a literary text.

## Slide Eight: Theoretical Response: Revisiting Texts

For our theoretical response this week, we will revisit the three poems we worked with for our first essay.

- Please choose a different poem than the one you wrote your essay about.
- Choose one of the critical approaches (Marxist, Postcolonial, or Ethnic Studies) to apply to your text.
- Create a list of questions about the text using the examples for “A Cup of Tea” as your guide. You can also use ChatGPT or another generative AI program to help you generate your list.
- Write your 500-750 word “mini-essay” and post to the discussion board.

As always, if you have any questions, please reach out! I really look forward to seeing your responses and application of these theories.



## 36. Feedback

I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)

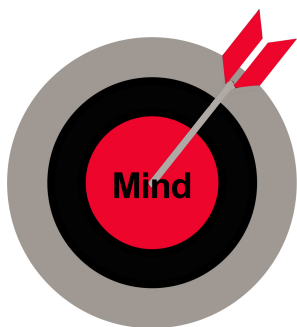


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## SECTION VII

# MIND: PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

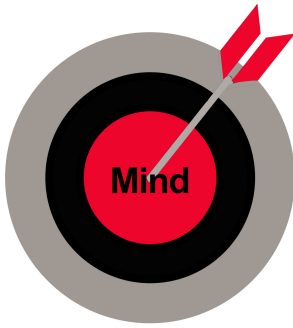


*Psychological criticism focuses on the human mind, analyzing characters' motivations, behaviors, and the psychological aspects embedded in literary works to unveil the complexities of the human psyche and its representation in narrative form. In the following chapters, you will learn more*

*about this type of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*



# 37. What Is Psychological Criticism?



Psychological criticism is a critical approach to literature that employs psychological theories to examine aspects of a literary work as a way to better understand both the author's mind and the characters, themes, and other elements of the text. Thus, the mind is at the center of our target as we

learn more about psychological criticism. This approach draws on theories and concepts from psychology, such as psychoanalysis and behavioral psychology, to analyze literary works. It often focuses on the motivations, desires, and conflicts of the characters, and how they are reflected in the structure and themes of the work.

One of the key principles of psychological criticism is the idea that literature can be used to explore and understand the human psyche, including unconscious and repressed desires and fears. For example, psychoanalytic criticism might explore how the characters in a work of literature are shaped by their early childhood experiences or their relationships with their parents.

Psychological criticism can be applied to any genre of literature, from poetry to novels to plays, and can be used to analyze a wide range of literary works, from classic literature to

contemporary bestsellers. It is often used in conjunction with other critical approaches, such as feminist or postcolonial criticism, to explore the ways in which psychological factors intersect with social and cultural factors in the creation and interpretation of literary works.

## Learning Objectives

- Deliberate on what approach best suits particular texts and purposes (CLO 1.4)
- Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation (CLO 2.3)
- Be exposed to a variety of critical strategies through literary theory lenses, such as formalism/ New Criticism, reader-response, structuralism, deconstruction, historical and cultural approaches (New Historicism, postcolonial, Marxism), psychological approaches, feminism, and queer theory. (CLO 4.2)
- Learn to make effective choices about applying critical strategies to texts that demonstrate awareness of the strategy's assumptions and expectations, the text's literary maneuvers, and the stance one takes in literary interpretation (CLO 4.4)

- Be exposed to the diversity of human experience, thought, politics, and conditions through the application of critical theory (CLO 6.4)

## Excerpts from Psychological Criticism Scholarship

I have a confession to make that is likely rooted in my unconscious (or perhaps I am repressing something): I don't much care for Sigmund Freud. But his psychoanalytic approach underpins psychological criticism in literary studies, so it's important to be aware of psychoanalytic concepts and how they can be used in literary analysis. We will read a few examples of psychological criticism below, starting with a primary text, a theoretical explanation of psychoanalytic theory, Freud's "First Lecture" (1920). In this reading, Freud gives a broad outline of the two main tenets of his theories: 1) that our behaviors are often indicators of psychic processes that are unconscious; and 2) that sexual impulses are at the root of mental disorders as well as cultural achievements. In the second and third readings, I share two examples of literary criticism, one written by a medical doctor in 1910 that uses Freud's Oedipus complex theories to explicate William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, and the second, a modern example of psychological theory applied to the same play. To appreciate how influential Freud's theories have been on the study of *Hamlet*, try a simple JSTOR search with "Freud" and "Hamlet" as your key terms. When I tried this in October 2023, the search yielded 7,420 results.

## From “First Lecture” in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* by Sigmund Freud (1920)

With two of its assertions, psychoanalysis offends the whole world and draws aversion upon itself. One of these assertions offends an intellectual prejudice, the other an aesthetic-moral one. Let us not think too lightly of these prejudices; they are powerful things, remnants of useful, even necessary, developments of mankind. They are retained through powerful affects, and the battle against them is a hard one.

The first of these displeasing assertions of psychoanalysis is this, that the psychic processes are in themselves unconscious, and that those which are conscious are merely isolated acts and parts of the total psychic life. Recollect that we are, on the contrary, accustomed to identify the psychic with the conscious. Consciousness actually means for us the distinguishing characteristic of the psychic life, and psychology is the science of the content of consciousness. Indeed, so obvious does this identification seem to us that we consider its slightest contradiction obvious nonsense, and yet psychoanalysis cannot avoid raising this contradiction; it cannot accept the identity of the conscious with the psychic. Its definition of the psychic affirms that they are processes of the nature of feeling, thinking, willing; and it must assert that there is such a thing as unconscious thinking and unconscious willing. But with this assertion psychoanalysis has alienated, to start with, the sympathy of all friends of sober science, and has laid itself open to the suspicion of being a fantastic mystery study which would build in darkness and fish in murky waters. You, however, ladies and



gentlemen, naturally cannot as yet understand what justification I have for stigmatizing as a prejudice so abstract a phrase as this one, that "the psychic is consciousness." You cannot know what evaluation can have led to the denial of the unconscious, if such a thing really exists, and what advantage may have resulted from this denial. It sounds like a mere argument over words whether one shall say that the psychic coincides with the conscious or whether one shall extend it beyond that, and yet I can assure you that by the acceptance of unconscious processes you have paved the way for a decisively new orientation in the world and in science.

Just as little can you guess how intimate a connection this initial boldness of psychoanalysis has with the one which follows. The next assertion which psychoanalysis proclaims as one of its discoveries, affirms that those instinctive impulses which one can only call sexual in the narrower as well as in the wider sense, play an uncommonly large role in the causation of nervous and mental diseases, and that those impulses are a causation which has never been adequately appreciated. Nay, indeed, psychoanalysis claims that these same sexual impulses have made contributions whose value cannot be overestimated to the highest cultural, artistic and social achievements of the human mind.

According to my experience, the aversion to this conclusion of psychoanalysis is the most significant source of the opposition which it encounters. Would you like to know how we explain this fact? We believe that civilization was forged by the driving force of vital necessity, at the cost of instinct-satisfaction, and that the process is to a large extent constantly repeated anew, since each individual who newly enters the

human community repeats the sacrifices of his instinct-satisfaction for the sake of the common good. Among the instinctive forces thus utilized, the sexual impulses play a significant role. They are thereby sublimated, i.e., they are diverted from their sexual goals and directed to ends socially higher and no longer sexual. But this result is unstable. The sexual instincts are poorly tamed. Each individual who wishes to ally himself with the achievements of civilization is exposed to the danger of having his sexual instincts rebel against this sublimation. Society can conceive of no more serious menace to its civilization than would arise through the satisfying of the sexual instincts by their redirection toward their original goals. Society, therefore, does not relish being reminded of this ticklish spot in its origin; it has no interest in having the strength of the sexual instincts recognized and the meaning of the sexual life to the individual clearly delineated. On the contrary, society has taken the course of diverting attention from this whole field. This is the reason why society will not tolerate the above-mentioned results of psychoanalytic research, and would prefer to brand it as aesthetically offensive and morally objectionable or dangerous. Since, however, one cannot attack an ostensibly objective result of scientific inquiry with such objections, the criticism must be translated to an intellectual level if it is to be voiced. But it is a predisposition of human nature to consider an unpleasant idea untrue, and then it is easy to find arguments against it. Society thus brands what is unpleasant as untrue, denying the conclusions of psychoanalysis with logical and pertinent arguments. These arguments originate from affective sources, however, and society holds to these prejudices against all attempts at refutation.

## Excerpts from “The Œdipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet’s Mystery: A Study in Motive” by Ernest Jones (1910)

The particular problem of Hamlet, with which this paper is concerned, is intimately related to some of the most frequently recurring problems that are presented in the course of psycho-analysis [sic], and it has thus seemed possible to secure a new point of view from which an answer might be offered to questions that have baffled attempts made along less technical routes. Some of the most competent literary authorities have freely acknowledged the inadequacy of all the solutions of the problem that have up to the present been offered, and from a psychological point of view this inadequacy is still more evident. The aim of the present paper is to expound an hypothesis which Freud some nine years ago suggested in one of the footnotes to his *Traumdeutung*; so far as I am aware it has not been critically discussed since its publication. Before attempting this it will be necessary to make a few general remarks about the nature of the problem and the previous solutions that have been offered.

The problem presented by the tragedy of Hamlet is one of peculiar interest in at least two respects. In the first place the play is almost universally considered to be the chief masterpiece of one of the greatest minds the world has known. It probably expresses the core of Shakspeare’s [sic] philosophy and outlook on life as no other work of his does, and so far excels all his other writings that many competent critics would place it on an entirely separate level from them. It may be expected, therefore, that anything which will give us the key to the inner meaning of the play will necessarily

give us the clue to much of the deeper workings of Shakspeare's mind. In the second place the intrinsic interest of the play is exceedingly great. The central mystery in it, namely the cause of Hamlet's hesitancy in seeking to obtain revenge for the murder of his father, has well been called the Sphinx of modern Literature. It has given rise to a regiment of hypotheses, and to a large library of critical and controversial literature; this is mainly German and for the most part has grown up in the past fifty years. No review of the literature will here be attempted....

The most important hypotheses that have been put forward are sub-varieties of three main points of view. The first of these sees the difficulty in the performance of the task in Hamlet's temperament, which is not suited to effective action of any kind; the second sees it in the nature of the task, which is such as to be almost impossible of performance by any one; and the third in some special feature in the nature of the task which renders it peculiarly difficult or repugnant to Hamlet....

No disconnected and meaningless drama could have produced the effects on its audiences that Hamlet has continuously done for the past three centuries. The underlying meaning of the drama may be totally obscure, but that there is one, and one which touches on problems of vital interest to the human heart, is empirically demonstrated by the uniform success with which the drama appeals to the most diverse audiences. To hold the contrary is to deny all the canons of dramatic art accepted since the time of Aristotle. Hamlet as a masterpiece stands or falls by these canons. We are compelled then to take the position that there is some cause for Hamlet's vacillation which has not yet been fathomed. If this lies neither in his incapacity for action in general, nor in the inordinate difficulty of the

task in question, then it must of necessity lie in the third possibility, namely in some special feature of the task that renders it repugnant to him. This conclusion, that Hamlet at heart does not want to carry out the task, seems so obvious that it is hard to see how any critical reader of the play could avoid making it....

It may be asked: why has the poet not put in a clearer light the mental trend we are trying to discover? Strange as it may appear, the answer is the same as in the case of Hamlet himself, namely, he could not, because he was unaware of its nature. We shall later deal with this matter in connection with the relation of the poet to the play. But, if the motive of the play is so obscure, to what can we attribute its powerful effect on the audience? This can only be because the hero's conflict finds its echo in a similar inner conflict in the mind of the hearer, and the more intense is this already present conflict the greater is the effect of the drama. Again, the hearer himself does not know the inner cause of the conflict in his mind, but experiences only the outer manifestations of it. We thus reach the apparent paradox that the hero, the poet, and the audience are all profoundly moved by feelings *due to a conflict of the source of which they are unaware* [emphasis added].

The extensive experience of the psycho-analytic researches carried out by Freud and his school during the past twenty years has amply demonstrated that certain kinds of mental processes shew a greater tendency to be "repressed" (*verdrängt*) than others. In other words, it is harder for a person to own to himself the existence in his mind of some mental trends than it is of others. In order to gain a correct perspective it is therefore desirable briefly to enquire into the relative frequency with which various sets of mental processes are "repressed." One might in this connection venture

the generalisation that those processes are most likely to be “repressed” by the individual which are most disapproved of by the particular circle of society to whose influence he has chiefly been subjected. Biologically stated, this law would run: “That which is unacceptable to the herd becomes unacceptable to the individual unit,” it being understood that the term *herd* is intended in the sense of the particular circle above defined, which is by no means necessarily the community at large. It is for this reason that moral, social, ethical or religious influences are hardly ever “repressed,” for as the individual originally received them from his herd, they can never come into conflict with the dicta of the latter. This merely says that a man cannot be ashamed of that which he respects; the apparent exceptions to this need not here be explained. The contrary is equally true, namely that mental trends “repressed” by the individual are those least acceptable to his herd; they are, therefore, those which are, curiously enough, distinguished as “natural” instincts, as contrasted with secondarily acquired mental trends.

It only remains to add the obvious corollary that, as the herd unquestionably selects from the “natural” instincts the sexual ones on which to lay its heaviest ban, so is it the various psycho-sexual trends that most often are “repressed” by the individual. We have here an explanation of the clinical experience that the more intense and the more obscure is a given case of deep mental conflict the more certainly will it be found, on adequate analysis, to centre about a sexual problem. On the surface, of course, this does not appear so, for, by means of various psychological defensive mechanisms, the depression, doubt, and other manifestations of the conflict are transferred on to more acceptable subjects,

such as the problems of immortality, future of the world, salvation of the soul, and so on.

Bearing these considerations in mind, let us return to Hamlet. It should now be evident that the conflict hypotheses above mentioned, which see Hamlet's "natural" instinct for revenge inhibited by an unconscious misgiving of a highly ethical kind, are based on ignorance of what actually happens in real life, for misgivings of this kind are in fact readily accessible to introspection. Hamlet's self-study would speedily have made him conscious of any such ethical misgivings, and although he might subsequently have ignored them, it would almost certainly have been by the aid of a process of rationalization which would have enabled him to deceive himself into believing that such misgivings were really ill founded; he would in any case have remained conscious of the nature of them. We must therefore invert these hypotheses, and realise that the positive striving for revenge was to him the moral and social one, and that the suppressed negative striving against revenge arose in some hidden source connected with his more personal, "natural" instincts. The former striving has already been considered, and indeed is manifest in every speech in which Hamlet debates the matter; the second is, from its nature, more obscure and has next to be investigated.

This is perhaps most easily done by inquiring more intently into Hamlet's precise attitude towards the object of his vengeance, Claudius, and towards the crimes that have to be avenged. These are two, Claudius' incest with the Queen, and his murder of his brother. It is of great importance to note the fundamental difference in Hamlet's attitude towards these two crimes. Intellectually of course he abhors both, but there can be no question as to which arouses in him the

deeper loathing. Whereas the murder of his father evokes in him indignation, and a plain recognition of his obvious duty to avenge it, his mother's guilty conduct awakes in him the intensest horror. Now, in trying to define Hamlet's attitude towards his uncle we have to guard against assuming offhand that this is a simple one of mere execration, for there is a possibility of complexity arising in the following way: The uncle has not merely committed each crime, he has committed both crimes, a distinction of considerable importance, for the combination of crimes allows the admittance of a new factor, produced by the possible inter-relation of the two, which prevents the result from being simply one of summation. In addition it has to be borne in mind that the perpetrator of the crimes is a relative, and an exceedingly near relative. The possible inter-relation of the crimes, and the fact that the author of them is an actual member of the family on which they were perpetrated, gives scope for a confusion in their influence on Hamlet's mind that may be the cause of the very obscurity we are seeking to clarify.

Jones, Ernest. "The Œdipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive." *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1910, pp. 72–113. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1412950>. Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.

## Introduction to "Ophelia's Desire" by James Marino (2017)

Every great theory is founded on a problem it cannot solve. For psychoanalytic criticism, that problem is Ophelia. Sigmund Freud's Oedipal reading of *Hamlet*, mutually constitutive with his reading of *Oedipus Rex*,



initiates the project of Freudian literary interpretation. But that reading must, by its most basic logic, displace Ophelia and render her an anomaly. If the Queen is Hamlet's primary erotic object, why does he have another love interest? Why such a specific and unusual love interest? The answer that Freud and his disciples offer is that Hamlet's expressions of love or rage toward Ophelia are displacements of his cathexis on the queen. That argument is tautological—one might as easily say that Hamlet displaces his cathected frustration with Ophelia onto the Queen—and requires that some evidence from the text be ignored—"No, good mother," Hamlet tells the Queen, "here's metal more attractive"—but the idea of the Queen as Hamlet's primary affective object remains a standard orthodoxy, common even in feminist Freudians' readings of *Hamlet*. Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers*, for example, takes the mother-son dyad as central, while Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard highlight the symbolic condensation of Ophelia with the Queen. The argument for Ophelia as substitute object may reach its apotheosis in Jacques Lacan's famous essay on Hamlet, which begins with "that piece of bait named Ophelia" only to use her as an example of Hamlet's estrangement from his own desire.

Margreta de Grazia's *"Hamlet" without Hamlet* has illuminated how the romantic tradition of *Hamlet* criticism, from which Freud's own *Hamlet* criticism derives, focuses on Hamlet's psychology at the expense of the play's other characters, who are reduced to figures in the Prince's individual psychomachia. While psychoanalytic reading objectifies all of *Hamlet*'s supporting characters, Ophelia is not even allowed to be an object in her own right. Insistently demoted to a secondary or surrogate object, Ophelia becomes

mysteriously super-fluous, like a symptom unconnected from its cause. Ophelia is the foundational problem, the nagging flaw in psychoanalytic criticism's cornerstone. The play becomes very different if Ophelia is decoupled from the Queen and read as an independent and structurally central character, as a primary object of desire, and even as a desiring subject in her own right.

I do not mean to describe the character as a real person, with a fully human psychology; Ophelia is a fiction, constructed from intersecting and contradicting generic expectations. But in those generic terms Ophelia is startlingly unusual, indeed unique, in ways that psychoanalytic criticism has been reluctant to recognize. If stage characters become individuated to the extent that they deviate from established convention, acting against type, then Ophelia is one of William Shakespeare's most richly individual heroines. And if Shakespeare creates the illusion of interiority, or invites his audience to collaborate in that illusion, by withholding easy explanations of motive, Ophelia's inner life is rich with mystery. Attention to the elements of Ophelia's character that psychoanalytic readings resist or repress illuminates the deeper fantasies shaping psychoanalytic discourse. The literary dreams underpinning psychoanalysis are neither simply to be debunked nor to be reconstituted, but to be analyzed. If, as the debates over psychoanalysis over the last three decades have shown, much of Freudian thinking is not science, then it is fantasy; and fantasy, as Freud himself teaches, rewards strict attention. Ophelia, rightly attended, may tell us something about Hamlet, and about Hamlet, that critics have not always wished to know. To see Ophelia clearly would also make it clear how closely Hamlet resembles her and how faithfully his tragic arc follows hers.

Marino, James J. "Ophelia's Desire." *ELH*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2017, pp. 817–39. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26797511>. Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.

What similarities do you find in these three works of scholarship? What do you think of Freud's theories and what they reveal about authors and texts?

## Beyond Freud: Applying Psychological Theories to Literary Texts

Fortunately, we are not limited to Freud when we engage in psychological criticism. We can choose any psychological theory. Here are just a few you might consider:

- Carl Jung's archetypes: humans have a collective unconscious that includes universal archetypes such as the shadow, the persona, and the anima/us.
- B.F. Skinner's behaviorism: all behaviors are learned through conditioning.
- Jacques Lacan's conception of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic.
- Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development: describes the effects of social development across a person's lifespan.
- Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development: explains how people develop moral reasoning.
- Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs: people's basic needs need to be met before they can pursue more advanced emotional and intellectual needs.
- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: a framework for understanding loss.
- Mamie Phipps Clark and Kenneth Bancroft Clark's work on internalized racism.
- Derald Wing Sue and David Sue's work with Indigenous

spiritual frameworks and mental health.

It's important to differentiate this type of criticism from looking at "mental health" or considering how the poem affects our emotions. When we are exploring how a poem makes us feel, this is subjective reader response, not psychological criticism. Psychological criticism involves analyzing a literary work through the lens of a psychological theory, exploring characters' motivations, behaviors, and the author's psychological influences. Here are a few approaches you might take to apply psychological criticism to a text:

1. **Psychological Theories:** Familiarize yourself with the basics of key psychological theories, such as Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, or cognitive psychology. This knowledge provides a foundation for interpreting characters and their actions. It's best to choose one particular theory to use in your analysis.
2. **Author's Background:** Research the author's life and background. Explore how their personal experiences, relationships, and psychological state might have influenced the creation of characters or the overall themes of the text. Also consider what unconscious desires or fears might be present in the text. How can the text serve as a window to the author's mind? The fictional novel *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell uses the text of *Hamlet* along with the few facts that are known about Shakespeare's life to consider how the play could be read as an expression of the author's grief at losing his 11-year-old son.
3. **Character Analysis:** Examine characters' personalities, motivations, and conflicts. Consider how their experiences, desires, and fears influence their actions within the narrative. Look for signs of psychological trauma, defense mechanisms, or unconscious desires. You can see an

example of this in the two literary articles above, where the authors consider Hamlet's and Ophelia's motivations and conflicts.

4. **Symbolism and Imagery:** Analyze symbols and imagery in the text. Understand how these elements may represent psychological concepts or emotions. For example, a recurring symbol might represent a character's repressed desires or fears.
5. **Themes and Motifs:** Identify recurring themes and motifs. Explore how these elements reflect psychological concepts or theories. For instance, a theme of isolation might be analyzed in terms of its impact on characters' mental states. An example of a motif in Hamlet would be the recurring ghost.
6. **Archetypal Analysis:** Jungian analysis is one of my personal favorite approaches to take to texts. You can apply archetypal psychology to identify universal symbols or patterns in characters. Carl Jung's archetypes, such as the persona, shadow, or anima/animus, can provide insights into the deeper layers of character development.
7. **Psychological Trajectories:** Trace the psychological development of characters throughout the narrative. Identify key moments or events that shape their personalities and behaviors. Consider how these trajectories contribute to the overall psychological impact of the text.
8. **Psychoanalytic Concepts:** If relevant, apply psychoanalytic concepts such as id, ego, and superego. Explore how characters navigate internal conflicts or succumb to unconscious desires. Freudian analysis can uncover hidden motivations and tensions.

Because psychological criticism involves interpretation, there may be multiple valid perspectives on a single text. When using this critical method, I recommend focusing on a single

psychological approach (e.g. choose Freud or Jung; don't try to do both).

Let's practice with Emily Dickinson's poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," using Freud's psychoanalytic theories as our psychological approach. Read the poem first, then use the questions below to guide your interpretation of the poem.

## A Narrow Fellow in the Grass\* (1865)

BY EMILY DICKINSON

A narrow fellow in the  
grass

Occasionally rides:

You may have met him,  
—did you not,

His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as  
with a comb,

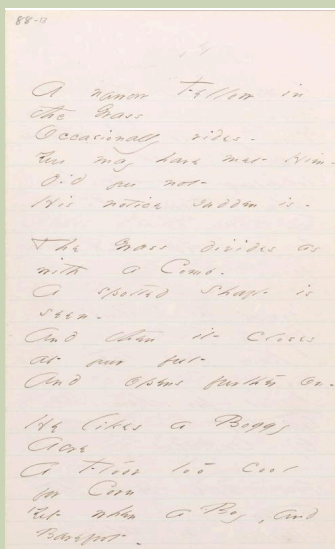
A spotted shaft is seen;

And then it closes at your  
feet

And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre.  
A floor too cool for corn.

Yet when a child, and



Manuscript of "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" from the Morgan Library

barefoot,  
I more than once, at morn,  
    Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash  
Unbraiding in the Sun.—  
When, stooping to secure it,  
It wrinkled, and was gone.  
    Several of nature's people  
I know, and they know me;  
I feel for them a transport  
Of cordiality;  
    But never met this fellow,  
Attended or alone,  
Without a tighter breathing,  
And zero at the bone.

\*I've used the "corrected" version published in 1865. Here is a link to the transcribed version from the original manuscript.

Here are a few questions to consider as you apply Freudian psychoanalysis to the poem.

1. **Imagery and Motifs:** This poem is one of just 10 Emily Dickinson poems published during her lifetime. The editor chose a different title for the poem: "The Snake". How does adding this title change the reader's experience with the poem? Which words in the poem seem odd in the context of this title? In a Freudian reading of the poem, what would the snake (if it is a snake) represent?
2. **Repression and Symbolism:** How might the "narrow Fellow in the Grass" symbolize repressed desires or memories in the speaker's subconscious? What elements in the poem suggest a hidden, perhaps uncomfortable, aspect of the speaker's psyche?

3. **Penis Envy:** In Freudian theory, penis envy refers to a girl's desire for male genitalia. How does this concept apply to the poem? Dickinson's handwritten version of the poem says "boy" instead of "child" in line 11. How does this change impact how we read the poem?
4. **Unconscious Fears and Anxiety (Zero at the Bone):** The closing lines mention a "tighter Breathing" and feeling "Zero at the Bone." How can Freud's ideas about the unconscious and anxiety be applied here? What might the encounter with the Fellow reveal about the speaker's hidden fears or anxieties, and how does it impact the speaker on a deep, unconscious level?
5. **Punctuation:** The manuscript versions of this poem do not use normal punctuation conventions. Instead, the author uses a dash. How does this change our reading of the poem? What does her use of dashes imply about her psychological state?

As with New Historicism, you'll need to do some research and cite a source for the psychological theory you apply. Introduce the psychological theory, then use it to analyze the poem. Make sure to support your analysis with specific textual evidence from the poem. Use line numbers to refer to specific parts of the text.

You'll want to come up with a thesis statement that you can support with the evidence you've found.

**Freudian Analysis Thesis Statement:** In Emily Dickinson's poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," the encounter with a snake serves as a symbolic manifestation of repressed desires, unconscious



fears, and penis envy, offering a Freudian exploration of the complex interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind.

How would this thesis statement be different if you had chosen a different approach—for example, Erik Erikson's theory of child development? How does this analysis differ from a New Criticism approach? Do you think that a Freudian approach is useful in helping readers to appreciate this poem?

## The Limitations of Psychological Criticism

While psychological criticism provides valuable insights into the human psyche and enriches our understanding of literary works, it also has its limitations. Here are a few:

1. **Subjectivity:** Psychological interpretations often rely on subjective analysis, as different readers may perceive and interpret psychological elements in a text differently. The lack of objective criteria can make it challenging to establish a universally accepted interpretation. However, using an established psychological theory can help to address this concern.
2. **Authorial Intent:** Inferring an author's psychological state or intentions based on their work can be speculative. Without direct evidence from the author about their psychological motivations, interpretations may be subjective and open to debate.
3. **Overemphasis on Individual Psychology:** Psychological criticism may focus heavily on individual psychology and

neglect broader social, cultural, or historical contexts that also influence literature. This narrow focus may oversimplify the complexity of human experience.

4. **Stereotyping Characters:** Applying psychological theories to characters may lead to oversimplified or stereotypical portrayals. Characters might be reduced to representing specific psychological concepts, overlooking their multifaceted nature. Consider the scholarly readings above and how Ophelia has traditionally been read as an accessory to Hamlet rather than as a fully developed character in her own right.
5. **Neglect of Formal Elements:** Psychological criticism may sometimes neglect formal elements of a text, such as structure, style, and language, in favor of exploring psychological aspects. This oversight can limit a comprehensive understanding of the literary work.
6. **Inconsistency in Psychoanalytic Theories:** Different psychoanalytic theories exist, and scholars may apply competing frameworks, leading to inconsistent interpretations. For example, a Freudian interpretation may differ significantly from a Jungian analysis.
7. **Exclusion of Reader Response:** While psychological criticism often explores the author's psyche, it may not give sufficient attention to the diverse psychological responses of readers. The reader's own psychology and experiences contribute to the meaning derived from a text. In formal literary criticism, as we noted above, this type of approach is considered to be subjective reader response, but it might be an interesting area of inquiry that is traditionally excluded from psychological criticism approaches.
8. **Neglect of Positive Aspects:** Psychological criticism may sometimes focus too much on negative or pathological aspects of characters, overlooking positive psychological dimensions and the potential for growth and redemption.

within the narrative (we care a lot more about what's *wrong* with Hamlet than what's right with him).

Acknowledging these limitations helps balance the use of psychological criticism with other literary approaches, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of a literary work.

## Psychological Criticism Scholars

There is considerable overlap in psychological criticism scholarship. With this type of approach, some psychologists/psychiatrists use literary texts to demonstrate or explicate psychological theories, while some literary scholars use psychological theories to interpret works. Here are a few better-known literary scholars who practice this type of criticism:

- Sigmund Freud, who used Greek literature to develop his theories about the psyche
- Carl Jung, whose ideas of the archetypes are fascinating
- Alfred Adler, a student of Freud's who particularly focused on literature and psychoanalysis
- Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst whose ideas of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic provide interesting insights into literary texts.

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## 38. Generative AI Model Essay

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

### Model AI Essay: Psychological Criticism (Freud)

"Psychoanalyzing Love: Freudian  
Insights into John Donne's 'The  
Canonization'"

"The Canonization" by John Donne is a poem that

explores the theme of love and its various stages. Through the use of Freudian analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological motivations behind the speaker's actions and emotions.

The speaker in the poem is deeply in love with his beloved, and is willing to suffer for her love. This is evident in lines such as "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love," which shows the speaker's intense desire to be with his beloved, even if it means sacrificing his own happiness. This is an example of the Freudian concept of the pleasure principle, where the speaker is driven by his desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

Another aspect of the poem that can be analyzed through a Freudian lens is the speaker's use of religious imagery. The speaker compares his love to a religious devotion, and speaks of himself and his beloved as "saints" and "canonized." This can be seen as a manifestation of the speaker's desire to elevate his love to a higher level, and to make it something sacred and holy. This is in line with Freud's idea of sublimation, where individuals channel their unconscious desires into more socially acceptable forms.

Additionally, the speaker's use of language in the poem can also be analyzed through a Freudian lens. The speaker uses words such as "consumed," "waste," and "martyr," which suggest that the speaker is willing to sacrifice himself for his beloved. This can be seen as an expression of the speaker's unconscious desire for self-destruction, which is a common trait in those suffering from unrequited love.

In conclusion, “The Canonization” by John Donne is a complex poem that explores the theme of love and its various stages. Through the use of Freudian analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological motivations behind the speaker’s actions and emotions, including his intense desire to be with his beloved, his desire to elevate his love to a higher level, and his willingness to sacrifice himself for his beloved.

Source: <https://chat.openai.com/share/a54f0151-9b61-40bd-a8e9-5978dfcd04e8>

This is a fairly prosaic and conventional essay, and it lacks a coherent approach, but there are some things we can work with, as I’ve noted in my annotations below. Especially when you’re working with a new or unfamiliar critical lens, using an AI model essay as a starting point might help you to identify search terms and knowledge gaps. It can also suggest a few different avenues that you could explore in your own essay.

## “Psychoanalyzing Love: Freudian Insights into John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

“The Canonization” by John Donne is a poem that explores the theme of love and its various stages. Through the use of **Freudian** analysis, we can gain a deeper **understanding** of the **psychological motivations** behind the speaker’s actions and emotions. You can kind of see how ChatGPT works with this opening paragraph. It takes the words from my prompt and regurgitates them back to me. I don’t really see a thesis statement that uses psychological criticism here. But reading



through the essay, I can piece one together. Here's what I come up with: When analyzed through a Freudian lens, John Donne's "The Canonization" provides examples of the pleasure principle, sublimation, and the speaker's unconscious desire for self destruction.

The speaker in the poem is deeply in love with his beloved, and is willing to suffer for her love. This is evident in lines such as "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love," which shows the speaker's intense **desire** to be with his beloved, even if it means sacrificing his own happiness. This is an example of the **Freudian concept** of the **pleasure principle**, where the speaker is driven by his desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The pleasure principle is an actual Freudian concept. But this paragraph doesn't really make sense. While the first line might indicate the speaker's desire for the beloved, sacrificing his own happiness would not be an example of the pleasure principle, where we seek pleasure. For Jeremy Bentham, the English utilitarian philosopher, pleasure and happiness are synonymous.

Another aspect of the poem that can be analyzed through a **Freudian lens** is the speaker's use of **religious imagery**. The speaker compares his love to a religious devotion, and speaks of himself and his beloved as "saints" and "canonized." This can be seen as a manifestation of the speaker's desire to elevate his love to a higher level, and to make it something sacred and holy. This is in line with Freud's idea of **sublimation**, where individuals channel their **unconscious desires** into more socially acceptable forms. The use of religious imagery is undoubtedly an important feature of this poem, as we have seen in previous model essays. However, with psychological criticism, we'd want to consider this imagery in terms of the psychological theory, so this paragraph made me want to learn more about what Freud thought of religion. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Freud's thought on religion is, perhaps fittingly, rather complex and ambivalent:

while there can be little doubt as to its roundly skeptical, and at times hostile, character, it is nonetheless clear that he had a firm grounding in Jewish religious thought and that the religious impulse held a life-long fascination for him" (IEP). I think this is one of the more interesting aspects of the AI essay, so interesting, in fact, that I might use this as an idea generator for an essay of my own. Sublimation (as the AI correctly notes) is when we change socially unacceptable impulses into action that is socially acceptable. That's exactly what Donne is trying to do with his marriage.

Additionally, the speaker's use of language in the poem can also be analyzed through a **Freudian** lens. The speaker uses words such as "consumed," "waste," and "martyr," which suggest that the speaker is willing to **sacrifice** himself for his beloved. This can be seen as an expression of the speaker's unconscious desire for **self-destruction**, which is a common trait in those suffering from unrequited love. There's a Freudian term that would be better to use here: Death drive. This is the opposite of the pleasure principle. You may see these two terms contrasted as *eros* and *thanatos*. It might also be interesting to explore how these two Freudian concepts play out in the poem.

In conclusion, "The Canonization" by John Donne is a complex poem that explores the theme of love and its various stages. Through the use of **Freudian analysis**, we can gain a deeper understanding of the **psychological motivations** behind the speaker's actions and emotions, including his intense **desire** to be with his beloved, his **desire** to elevate his love to a higher level, and his willingness to **sacrifice** himself for his beloved. With psychological criticism, we can focus on the poem's speaker (or a novel's characters), but it would also be acceptable to consider what the poem revealed about the poet's mind, and I think there's a lot of room to work with here. The paragraph on sublimation would work well within the context of the poet's frame of mind.

## You Try It!

Choose a psychological lens (such as Freud, Jung, Kohlberg, etc.) and a poem. Using ChatGPT or another generative AI program, write a prompt to create a short AI essay that applies the psychological theory you chose to the text. Then analyze the essay. Is the theory correctly applied to the text? Does the essay give you ideas about how you might analyze the text? Do you notice any errors or hallucinations? Using JSTOR, try to locate an article that uses this psychological theory and the text you chose. How does the AI-generated essay compare with the JSTOR article?

# 39. Student Essay

## Example: Psychological Criticism

The following student essay example of Psychological Criticism is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses Raymond Carver's short story, "A Small, Good Thing."

## The Grieving Mind

*By Rachel Rees*

Literature gives us an insight into the human mind through the characters and the messages that the author has written. Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing" is one of those literature pieces that has many elements that help readers grasp and understand the emotions that people go through with dealing when lives are disrupted through injury and grief. The characters, husband and wife Howard and Ann, experience an assortment of emotions at varying times that correlate with Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief as well as perhaps other set emotions and moments outside of those five stages.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross investigated human grief and narrowed it down to five denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This is a set-up that we fall back on to help us understand the emotions we feel during an intense time in our lives. In "A Small, Good Thing" these stages don't start when Ann and Howard's son, Scotty, dies. Now the characters show these signs when Scotty has been admitted to the hospital and shows no signs in the tests why he doesn't wake up. In Bolden's review of Kubler-Ross's *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* denial is defined as "symbolic in that they cannot believe that their friend or family member will not, for example, be calling to say hello or returning from work at a certain time." We see this in the mother's thoughts as she leaves the hospital to go home

for a while. "She wished she were that woman and somebody, anybody, was driving her away from here to somewhere else, a place where she would find Scotty waiting for her when she stepped out of the car, ready to say Mom and let her gather him in her arms." (Carver, 7) This wish is a moment where Ann wants to deny what is happening. The reader of course can easily sympathize with the sentiment, no one wants to imagine the pain these parents are going through with the unknown. I believe that, in a way the father shows his own Denial when he also takes a moment to stop by at home to shower off. There are moments where he seems to be denying what is happening by his son by focus on himself.

The two cycle through these emotions at different rates, and then have to face denial once more when their son dies and isn't merely in a coma-like state. This comes out in the same moment, when they are leaving the hospital. For the mother it starts right off "She began shaking her head. "No, no," she said. "I can't leave him here, no." She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths." (Carver 12) On the same page its mere seconds later when it appears that the father starts on this same denial "An autopsy," Howard said. Dr. Francis nodded. "I understand," Howard said. Then he said, "Oh, Jesus. No, I don't understand, doctor. I can't, I can't. I just can't." His lack of understanding is part of that denial. The logic is likely there but the comprehending that its happening to his son, is too much. These two respond with the dysphoria that most would in this position.

The next stage in the five-stages model is Anger. This can be narrowed down to "A person's anger is directed at the person who died or at oneself for being unable to prevent his or her loved one's death. The authors contend that once individuals are in this stage, they recognize their ability to get through this difficult time." (Bolden) It is clear that these parents don't

blame their son. No, they place blame on the driver who didn't even stop to take any sense of responsibility for harming Scotty. We first see this anger come out when the dad gets home and the phone rings. As a reader we can make the connection that it is the baker calling, as the cake was supposed to be picked up today. To the father it seems like a mean and crude joke and thus his reaction is anger (Carver, 3). The anger also comes out when the mother goes home and answers the phone, also forgetting about the baker and the order and seeing it as the same cruel joke that her husband warned her of. "Your Scotty, I got him ready for you," the man's voice said. "Did you forget him?" "You evil bastard!" she shouted into the receiver. "How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch?" / "It was him," she said. "That bastard. I'd like to kill him," she said. "I'd like to shoot him and watch him kick," she said." (Carver, 13) Here she takes the assumption that the caller is the driver who had hit their son. This can also be seen as a step outside of the model.

They aren't really past denial and Ann and Howard can't really see past their grief on how to carry on and live past this trauma. The parents reach anger once again, after their son's death when once again the baker calls. Even as Ann recognizes it as the baker her anger doesn't recede, nor does the father's but hers is expressed more potently "There was a deep burning inside her, an anger that made her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these men." (Carver, 14). Their anger is a driving force to their actions, it is what is keeping them going in the face of their sons' death. They don't want to hurt alone and thus intend to bring a type of hurt on another. I feel like this is also a moment when the couple is trying to show the other that they aren't weak, however this has a possible backfiring effect towards the grieving process as "Grieving parents who try to protect their partner by "staying strong" and not discussing the child's death may actually prolong their grieving" (Myers & DeWall, 102). It is possible that by not communicating with one another the parents will be

extending their grief even more. Especially as the story itself seems to circle through the stages more than just the once going from when Scotty was merely ill to his actual passing.

Bargaining isn't really a stage that is easy to detect in this story. "Kubler-Ross and Kessler talk about the "what if" and "if only" mind-set wherein individuals who are grieving believe that they may have been able to control and thus prevent the loss of their family member or friend." (Bolden) It could be seen that when Scotty is still alive the mother is considering that her being at his bedside, never leaving, is a sort of bargaining. That if she remains, he'll wake up and everything will be alright. This same sentiment also feels like a sense of denial. Ann then comes to think the opposite,

She tried to think about it, but she was too tired. She closed her eyes and tried to think about it again. After a time, she said, "Maybe I will go home for a few minutes. Maybe if I'm not just sitting right here watching him every second, he'll wake up and be all right. You know? Maybe he'll wake up if I'm not here. I'll go home and take a bath and put on clean clothes. I'll feed Slug. Then I'll come back." (Carver, 8)

The father doesn't seem to negotiate or bargain so much, and if the character is going through this Carver has left it out to the reader's imagination. Perhaps it is because this moment is more important to see from the mother. For the reader to better understand and sympathize the mother's reluctant feelings and what she forces herself to think of just so that she leaves.

Our fourth stage following the model is Depression. "In this stage, the authors discuss the normalcy of feeling depressed and affirm the idea that such feelings are necessary for the healing process to begin." (Bolden) We can see that this depressed state also isn't entirely easy to define when Scotty is merely in bed. Once more we get a better sense of this through the character's just going through the motions. "They waited all day, but still the boy did not wake up. Occasionally, one of



them would leave the room to go downstairs to the cafeteria to drink coffee and then, as if suddenly remembering and feeling guilty, get up from the table and hurry back to the room.” (Carver, 6) I believe that Carver expresses that ‘depression’ through the guilt of the parent being away from their child. That just in that moment to go to get a drink of coffee the feel as if it’ll be their fault should Scotty wake up and they not be at his bedside waiting.

The stage of depression becomes more distinct for the mother as the wait for Scotty to wake continued. “She felt she was in some obscure way responsible for what had happened to the child.” (Carver, 10) In this moment it feels like she feels that guilt despite the fact that she personally had no part in the car incident. Then things take on a shift towards after Scotty’s death, when the parents have left the hospital and are at home. It becomes clear in the father’s actions on page 13, “In a little while, Howard got up and began moving aimlessly around the room with the box, not putting anything into it, but collecting some things together on the floor at one end of the sofa.” He reaches this state before the mother.

When the mother finally seems to reach that depressed state it is when they have confronted the baker. After the anger that had driven them to the bakery. “Just as suddenly as it had welled in her, the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. She leaned against the wooden table that was sprinkled with flour, put her hands over her face, and began to cry, her shoulders rocking back and forth. “It isn’t fair,” she said. “It isn’t, isn’t fair.” (Carver, 15) In this sense the father hadn’t followed the set stage as he had gone from his depression to his anger of the baker calling them, as if the baker was mocking them. It is also a show of how people move through grief at different rates and that Ann seems to process emotions further then the father.

The fifth stage in Kubler-Ross’s model is Acceptance. Bolden goes over how “At this stage, individuals are at a point where

they recognize the current state of their lives, without their loved one, as the reality and can live with that understanding." Now it is clear that neither Ann nor Howard reaches this state by the end of the story. But there are moments of a sort of pseudo-acceptance set. "Over his sobs, she could hear the coffee-maker hissing in the kitchen. "There, there," she said tenderly. "Howard, he's gone. He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone." (Carver Page 13) This is important how Ann acknowledges that her son is gone. It is a start towards acceptance. The true path towards acceptance is shown to the couple through the Baker. He acknowledges their grief and understands it even as if he never personally experienced this. "You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said." (Carver 16) I think this really sets apart from the five-stage model, as instead of a counselor or the parents themselves we have a baker giving them those steps on how to keep on living even after a hard time such as losing a child.

Raymond Carver has written a story that has character's going through a trying time. He has written a story that goes over grieving in a way that seems to follow Kubler-Ross's five stage model and also doesn't. People grieve and process at different rates, this is also shown with Ann and Howard. If the story continued on it would be more likely that the characters would cycle through the five-stage model as much as they would also fall outside of it. Still the story itself is a great study of what the human mind deals with when suffering through an unexpected loss.

## Works Cited

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Carver, Raymond. "A Small, Good Thing." *Ploughshares*, vol. 8, no. 2/3, 1982, pp. 213–240. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40348924](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40348924). Accessed 5 May 2021.

Myers, D. G., & DeWall, C. N. (2020). *Psychology in Everyday Life* (Fifth ed.). Holland, Michigan: Worth.

## 40. Practicing Psychological Criticism

Now that you've learned about psychological theory, practiced this method of analysis with "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," and reviewed some examples, you will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using reader response as your approach. You will read three different texts below. Choose one text and respond to the questions in a short essay (500-750 words).

I have included questions to guide your reading. You may choose to respond to some or all of these questions; however, your response should be written as a short essay, and you will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text. Post your short essay as a response to the Psychological Criticism Theoretical Response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

### Checklist for Practicing Psychological Criticism

Psychological criticism applies one psychological theory to a text. Here's a checklist that may help you. You do not need to address every item on this list.

1. **Choose a Theoretical Approach:** Identify the psychological theory or framework you will apply (e.g., Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, cognitive psychology, etc.). Understanding the chosen approach will guide your analysis.
2. **Character Analysis:** Examine the characters in the text, considering their motivations, behaviors, and conflicts. Look for signs of psychological complexity, trauma, or unconscious desires.
3. **Author's Background:** Research the author's life and background to gain insights into how personal experiences, relationships, or psychological states might have influenced the creation of the text. You can also consider what the text tells us or reinforces about the author's state of mind.
4. **Symbolism and Imagery:** Analyze symbols and imagery, exploring how they may represent psychological concepts or emotions. Consider how recurring symbols contribute to the overall psychological impact of the text.
5. **Archetypal Analysis (if using Jung):** If applying Jungian psychology, identify archetypal elements in characters or symbols. Explore universal patterns and symbols that may be present in the narrative.
6. **Psychoanalytic Concepts (if using Freud):** If applying Freudian psychoanalysis, explore concepts such as repression, desire, id, ego, and superego. Analyze how these concepts manifest in characters' thoughts and actions.

7. **Themes and Motifs:** Identify recurring themes and motifs in the text. Explore how these elements reflect psychological concepts or theories, contributing to the overall psychological dynamics of the narrative.
8. **Psychological Trajectories:** Trace the psychological development of characters throughout the narrative. Identify key moments or events that shape their personalities and behaviors.

## 1. ***Macbeth* Act V Scene 1. Dunsinane. Ante-room in the castle.**

*Enter a Doctor of Physic and a Waiting-Gentlewoman*

### **Doctor**

I have two nights watched with you, but can perceive no truth in your report. When was it she last walked?

### **Gentlewoman**

Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep.

### **Doctor**

A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once

the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching! In this slumberry agitation, besides her walking and other actual performances, what, at any time, have you heard her say?

**Gentlewoman**

That, sir, which I will not report after her.

**Doctor**

You may to me: and 'tis most meet you should.

**Gentlewoman**

Neither to you nor any one; having no witness to confirm my speech.

*Enter LADY MACBETH, with a taper*

Lo you, here she comes! This is her very guise; and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her; stand close.

**Doctor**

How came she by that light?

**Gentlewoman**

Why, it stood by her: she has light by her continually; 'tis her command.

**Doctor**

You see, her eyes are open.

**Gentlewoman**

Ay, but their sense is shut.

**Doctor**

What is it she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands.

**Gentlewoman**

It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

**LADY MACBETH**

Yet here's a spot.

**Doctor**

Hark! she speaks: I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

**LADY MACBETH**

Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky!—Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.

**Doctor**

Do you mark that?

**LADY MACBETH**

The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?—What, will these hands ne'er be clean?—No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that: you mar all with this starting.

**Doctor**



Go to, go to; you have known what you should not.

**Gentlewoman**

She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that: heaven knows what she has known.

**LADY MACBETH**

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!

**Doctor**

What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.

**Gentlewoman**

I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

**Doctor**

Well, well, well,—

**Gentlewoman**

Pray God it be, sir.

**Doctor**

This disease is beyond my practise: yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds.

**LADY MACBETH**

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so

pale.—I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave.

**Doctor**

Even so?

**LADY MACBETH**

To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate:  
come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's  
done cannot be undone.—To bed, to bed, to bed!

*Exit*

**Doctor**

Will she go now to bed?

**Gentlewoman**

Directly.

**Doctor**

Foul whisperings are abroad: unnatural deeds  
Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds  
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets:  
More needs she the divine than the physician.  
God, God forgive us all! Look after her;  
Remove from her the means of all annoyance,  
And still keep eyes upon her. So, good night:  
My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight.  
I think, but dare not speak.

**Gentlewoman**

Good night, good doctor.

*Exeunt*

*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare is in the Public Domain.

## Questions

1. **Repression and Symbolism:** Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and her obsessive hand-washing are classic signs of guilt and repressed emotions. How do her actions in this scene symbolize the repression of guilt and the psychological consequences of committing heinous acts?
2. **The Unconscious Mind and Sleepwalking:** Freud believed that the unconscious mind expresses itself in dreams and behaviors like sleepwalking. How does Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking serve as a manifestation of her unconscious mind, and what repressed desires or fears might be surfacing in her somnambulant state?
3. **Guilt and the Superego:** Lady Macbeth's guilt is evident in her repeated attempts to cleanse her hands. How does this ritualistic behavior reflect the internal conflict between her actions (id) and her moral conscience (superego)? How does the superego contribute to her psychological distress?
4. **Psychological Impact of Guilt on the Body:** In Freudian terms, how does Lady Macbeth's guilt manifest physically? Consider her exclamation, "Out, damned spot!" and her intense focus on the imagined stain. What does this reveal about the psychological impact of guilt on the body, as Freud would interpret it?
5. **The Role of Dreams and Nightmares:** Freud argued that dreams provide a window into the unconscious. Lady Macbeth's speech about Banquo's burial and the inability to undo past deeds occurs in a dreamlike state. How does the scene demonstrate Freud's concept of dreams as a pathway to repressed thoughts and unresolved conflicts?

## 2. Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)

BY ROBERT FROST

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.  
My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.  
He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.  
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

"Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost is in the Public Domain.

### Questions

Use Carl Jung's theory of archetypes to analyze this poem. Here are some questions that can guide you. You do not need to use all of the questions in your response.

1. **Archetypal Landscape:** How do the woods in the poem represent archetypal elements such as the unconscious or the unknown? Are there symbolic aspects of the woods

that evoke universal images or themes found in Jungian archetypes, such as the shadow or the collective unconscious?

2. **The Hero's Journey:** Considering the journey motif in Jungian archetypes, how does the speaker's progression through the snowy woods reflect the stages of the hero's journey? Are there moments in the poem that correspond to the hero's encounter with challenges, the unknown, or a transformative experience?
3. **Symbolism of the Horse:** In Jungian psychology, animals can represent aspects of the unconscious. How might the speaker's "little horse" symbolize the instinctual or intuitive aspects of the psyche? Does the horse's reaction to stopping in the woods reveal anything about the speaker's inner conflicts or desires?
4. **The Archetypal Dark and Deep:** The line "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" suggests a rich and mysterious aspect of the unconscious. How does this imagery connect with Jung's concept of the shadow or the hidden aspects of the self? What might the speaker be confronting or avoiding in the depths of the woods?
5. **Cyclic Archetypal Motif:** The repetition of the final lines, "And miles to go before I sleep," suggests a cyclical motif. How does this repetition connect with Jungian ideas of the eternal return or the circular nature of psychological development? Does the speaker's journey through the woods symbolize an ongoing process within the psyche?

### 3. "Caged Bird" (1983)

BY MAYA ANGELOU

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream

till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.  
But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.  
The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.  
The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own.  
But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.  
The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou, "Caged Bird" from *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou. All rights reserved. (Fair Use Exception)

Read the information about Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome below. Then apply this critical theory to "Caged Bird" by Maya Angelou.

In their essay, "'Addressing the Trauma of Racism from a Mental Health Perspective within the African American Community,'" Angela Grayson et al. share the following:

Dr. Joy DeGruy, author of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, developed a theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States.<sup>9</sup> She explains that it is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery, a form of slavery which was predicated on the belief that Africans were inherently genetically and biologically inferior to White people. As such, Africans were dehumanized as being without spirit, emotions, soul, desires and rights. However, once chattel slavery was abolished and dismantled, African Americans became the targets of institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate injury today. DeGruy's research lead her to the acronym M.A.P. which concludes that 1) **M**ultigenerational trauma together with continued oppression leads to 2) **A**bsence of opportunity to heal or access the benefits available in the society which ultimately leads to 3) **P**ost Traumatic Slave Syndrome or PTSS. She also proposed that the ability to identify a shared cultural experience and have a descriptive term—Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome—allows for individuals to identify the experience, articulate it, and express it without guilt,

fear, blame, or anger and is a source of healing and strengthening within the African American Community (Grayson et al.).

Grayson, Angela M et al. "Addressing the Trauma of Racism from a Mental Health Perspective within the African American Community." *Delaware Journal of Public Health* vol. 6,5 28-30. 7 Nov. 2020, doi:10.32481/djph.2020.11.008

## Theoretical Response Assignment Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.

## Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called "Practicing [Theoretical Approach]." (For example, "Practicing New Criticism") Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.



**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you've chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is

perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*

# 41. Psychological Criticism Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=551#oembed-1>*

## Slide One: Psychological Criticism (Mind)

Welcome! I'm Dr. Liza Long. In this presentation for English 211, we will learn more about psychological criticism as an approach to literary texts. Psychological criticism is actually an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of theoretical frameworks from the field of psychology, but all of these have the mind (or the psyche) at the center of their target.

As a quick aside, I think it's important to define what psychological criticism is *not*. When we do this type of criticism, we are not exploring how the text impacts your personal mental health or intersects with your own behavioral and emotional experiences. This is subjective reader response, a critical approach we learned earlier in the course.

What we mean by "mind" could be the author's mind, or it could be the character's mind, or it could be both. This means that with psychological criticism, we may explore author intent

in a way that we really have not in other theories we have studied beyond biographical criticism. However, in many psychological approaches, especially Freud, the author's stated intent would not matter because the text is a revelation of the author's unconscious thoughts and repressed desires.

We don't have to limit ourselves to the author's mind though. We can use the same type of exploration to look at the characters. In this type of criticism, at its most basic level, we are just applying psychological theories to the literary text. Essentially, we are asking of the characters, "why did you do that?" As with New Historicism, cultural studies, and other approaches we have studied, psychological criticism tends to be interdisciplinary. Psychologists and sociologists may draw on literary texts to illuminate something about the mind.

The most common type of psychological approach is Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and as I noted in the textbook, I am not really the biggest fan of Freud. When I do this type of criticism, my preference is often for Carl Jung, a student of Freud's who introduced the idea of archetypes. But really, you can use any theory that you've learned about. I think the student example I've given you applies Elisabeth Kubler Ross's five stages of grief to Raymond Carver's short story, "A Small, Good Thing." The idea with psychological criticism is that literature can be a useful tool to help us explore and understand the human psyche. With this type of criticism, we will focus on the author's or the characters' motivations, desires (both expressed and repressed), conflicts, and childhood experiences as ways to illuminate the text.

## **Slide Two: Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory**

For better or worse, Sigmund Freud was one of the most influential thinkers of the early twentieth century. He is the founder of the field of psychoanalysis, the first clinical method

for diagnosing and treating mental illness. Freud's experiences as a physician who focused on mental illness led him to develop his Oedipus Complex theory to explain how repressed desires and unfulfilled wishes can lead to neurosis. His 1899 book *Traumdeutung* (Interpretation of Dreams) was abridged as *On Dreams* in 1901 and introduced this theory. Freud's theories have often been applied to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, where the title character avenges his father's death at the hands of his uncle and mother. Some key concepts include repression, the Oedipus complex, and the id, ego, and superego (which are the three parts of the psyche).

To understand the Oedipus complex, you need a basic knowledge of the famous play Oedipus Rex by the Greek poet Sophocles. In this play, Oedipus, a powerful and wise king of Corinth, discovers that he has married his mother and killed his father. Freud saw the play as an archetypal exhibit of repressed sexual desires.

These theories about repressed childhood sexual desires are at the heart of psychoanalysis. Freud asserts that instinctive sexual impulses play a large role in both mental illness and in the creative process. I personally just have a high level of discomfort with Freud's theories—they are not something that resonates with me, but they have been popular approaches to literary texts.

In your readings this week, you have a passage from a lecture Sigmund Freud gave on the Oedipus Complex in 1920 (which is the most watered down version of his theory I could find) and two examples of scholarship applying Freud's theories. The first is Dr. Ernest Jones's 1910 analysis of *Hamlet* using the Oedipus Complex, and the second is James Marino's 2017 examination of how the character of Ophelia undercuts the application of this theory to *Hamlet*.

Everyone always wants to understand Hamlet's motives. Why does Hamlet act the way he does? And Ernest Jones is the first one who argues that Freud's Oedipus complex is a great

explanation for Hamlet's behavior. As you can imagine, if you've read Hamlet, there's so much written about Freud in Hamlet. If you Google Freud and Hamlet, you'll find tens of thousands of results.

Marino's basic argument is that no one ever looks at Ophelia, and that when we do, her characterization undercuts the Oedipus Complex approach to the play. I've linked to all three articles if you want to read them in their entirety. Reading the Ernest Jones article reminded me that modern scholars tend to get to their points much more quickly. You might take a look at his article just to see what literary criticism looks like in its early form. He has to engage with literally every person who's ever written about Hamlet, which is why you'll see so many ellipses. I think these three excerpts give you a good overview for what psychoanalytic criticism looks like.

As you can see from these examples, psychoanalytic theory predates New Criticism as a critical method (and is roughly contemporary with Marxist approaches). Most scholarship that references this theory now is more in line with Marino's critical approach, as psychoanalytic theory has been dismissed as a scientific approach to the mind by many modern psychologists.

## **Slide Three: Beyond Freud: Applying Psychological Theories to Literary Texts**

As you can see from this slide, we are not limited by Freud's psychoanalytic theories when we do psychological criticism. You could also look at Freud's student Carl Jung's archetypes and his theory of the collective unconscious. Or you could consider B.F. Skinner's behaviorism as an approach to character motivations in texts. Jacques Lacan is a psychologist by training but is often mentioned hand in hand with theorists

like Derrida and Michel Foucault in his more deconstructive approach to the subject. Lacan develops a sophisticated construct of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic to explain how minds function.

If you have taken an introductory psychology class, you are probably already familiar with Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Abraham Maslow. I have seen interesting student essays using each of these theoretical approaches. With Erikson, you would look at the character's psychosocial development over the lifespan. For Kohlberg, you could examine how people develop moral reasoning—one student applied this theory to Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* to explore how Klara, the artificial friend, developed her own moral intelligence. Maslow could also be used to explore character motivation and development.

I mentioned already that the student example for this section applies Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief as a framework for understanding loss. More current psychological approaches have used the pioneering work of Mamie Phipps Clark and Kenneth Bancroft Clark's work on internalized racism or Derald Wing Sue and David Sue's application of Indigenous spiritual frameworks to mental health. One of the examples for practice uses a newer example of a psychological theory that you can apply to a text.

## **Slide Four: Considerations in Psychological Criticism**

I just love this picture of Freud because he looks so judgmental! Psychological criticism employs a wide variety of approaches to texts. The specific approach you take will start with the identification of a single theoretical approach such as those

listed on the previous slide, though you are not limited to this list.

In psychological criticism, as with New Historicism, you'll need to cite at least one outside source, which you will use to define the critical method you are using.

Again, remember that with this type of criticism, you are not doing subjective reader response. It's not psychological criticism to talk about how the text makes you feel or affects your mental health. Here are a few things to consider when you do psychological criticism:

1. **Psychological Theories:** Familiarize yourself with the basics of key psychological theories, such as Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, or cognitive psychology. This knowledge provides a foundation for interpreting characters and their actions.
2. **Author's Background:** Research the author's life and background. Explore how their personal experiences, relationships, and psychological state might have influenced the creation of characters or the overall themes of the text. Also consider what unconscious desires or fears might be present in the text. How can the text serve as a window to the author's mind? The fictional novel *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell uses the text of *Hamlet* along with the few facts that are known about Shakespeare's life to consider how the play could be read as an expression of the author's grief at losing his 11-year-old son.
3. **Character Analysis:** Examine characters' personalities, motivations, and conflicts. Consider how their experiences, desires, and fears influence their actions within the narrative. Look for signs of psychological trauma, defense mechanisms, or unconscious desires. You can see an example of this in the two literary articles above, where the authors consider Hamlet's and Ophelia's motivations and



conflicts.

4. **Symbolism and Imagery:** Analyze symbols and imagery in the text. Understand how these elements may represent psychological concepts or emotions. For example, a recurring symbol might represent a character's repressed desires or fears.
5. **Themes and Motifs:** Identify recurring themes and motifs. Explore how these elements reflect psychological concepts or theories. For instance, a theme of isolation might be analyzed in terms of its impact on characters' mental states. An example of a motif in Hamlet would be the recurring ghost.
6. **Archetypal Analysis:** Jungian analysis is one of my personal favorite approaches to take to texts. You can apply archetypal psychology to identify universal symbols or patterns in characters. Carl Jung's archetypes, such as the persona, shadow, or anima/animus, can provide insights into the deeper layers of character development.
7. **Psychological Trajectories:** Trace the psychological development of characters throughout the narrative. Identify key moments or events that shape their personalities and behaviors. Consider how these trajectories contribute to the overall psychological impact of the text.
8. **Psychoanalytic Concepts:** If relevant, apply psychoanalytic concepts such as id, ego, and superego. Explore how characters navigate internal conflicts or succumb to unconscious desires. Freudian analysis can uncover hidden motivations and tensions.

## Slide Five: Example: Jung's Archetypes

When I do psychological criticism, I love looking for evidence of Jung's collective unconscious and considering how archetypes

function in a literary text. In archetypal criticism, archetypes determine the form and function of literary works. As Jung wrote in *Man and His Symbols*, “My views about the ‘archaic remnants,’ which I call ‘archetypes’ or ‘primordial images,’ have been constantly criticized by people who lack sufficient knowledge of the psychology of dreams and of mythology. The term ‘archetype’ is often misunderstood as meaning certain definite mythological images or motifs, but these are nothing more than conscious representations. Such variable representations cannot be inherited. The archetype is a tendency to form such representations of a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.” In other words, the archetypes arise unconsciously in literary texts. They are not deliberate choices according to Jung.

Jungian psychology has an influence on our lives in a variety of subtle ways, from the movies that we watch (Marvel and Star Wars are all about the archetypes) to the personality tests we take. The famous Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) used in many workplaces is based on Jungian archetypes.

In Jung’s theories, the persona, shadow, and anima/animus take the place of Freud’s id, ego, and superego to create the Self, our unified psyche. The persona is how we present ourselves to the world. The shadow represents our unconscious mind and its desires. The anima or animus is the opposite gender image in the psyche, or our “true self.” In other words, if I identify as a cisgender woman, my animus, the male image of myself, is my true self.

I have listed some of the more common archetypes here. I find them to be particularly useful when I teach mythology. According to Jung, we are not born with a mind that is a “blank slate,” instead, these archetypes are present in the collective unconscious of every human. In addition to the persona, the shadow, and the anima/animus, Jung also writes about the Father who represents the provider, protector, and wisdom and

the Mother who represents love, compassion, and caring. Other archetypes include the child, the hero (think of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey monomyth), the sage, the maiden, and the trickster.

## Slide Six: A Narrow Fellow in the Grass

To practice how we apply psychological criticism to a text, let's look at an Emily Dickinson poem, "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass." The text on this slide is the corrected version that Dickinson's editors published under the title "The Snake." It's one of just 10 poems that were published in her lifetime. Listen as I read the poem out loud and make notes about things that stand out to you. Pay attention to imagery and consider the speaker's and poet's gender.

A narrow fellow in the grass  
Occasionally rides:  
You may have met him, —did you not,  
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb,  
A spotted shaft is seen;  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre.  
A floor too cool for corn.  
Yet when a child, and barefoot,  
I more than once, at morn,  
Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash  
Unbraiding in the Sun.—  
When, stooping to secure it,  
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people  
I know, and they know me;

I feel for them a transport  
Of cordiality;  
    But never met this fellow,  
Attended or alone,  
Without a tighter breathing,  
And zero at the bone.

—Emily Dickinson

What stands out to you in the text? The word “snake” is never mentioned explicitly in the poem itself, but if we assume the “narrow fellow in the grass” is a snake, we definitely have some good material for our analysis. I’ll just be blunt. The snake in this poem is a phallic symbol, representing a penis, and the speaker, who identifies as a boy in the original draft, is demonstrating Freud’s concept of penis envy. With this type of analysis, it’s important to identify any symbols that may have sexual connotations.

The author has a female name but identifies as a male in the original draft of the poem (her editor changed “boy” to “child”). If we were doing Jungian analysis, we might think about the anima/animus here, but since we are trying a Freudian approach, I think it’s clear this is more evidence of penis envy.

I personally feel like this approach yields an exceptionally reductionist and narrow interpretation for this lovely little poem. But it’s pretty obvious how the imagery functions in Freudian analysis. With this approach, the poem is about penis envy and the poet’s repressed desires to be a boy. The anxiety the speaker exhibits in the lines “without a tighter breathing/ And zero at the bone” represent this repressed desire.

## Slide Seven: Terms To Use (Freud)

Here’s a list of terms that are used in Freudian criticism. For other types of psychological criticism, you’ll want to familiarize yourself with the theory you are using and apply the

terminology from that theory. These are all psychoanalytic terms. *Repression* is when a character exhibits a selective memory. Think of Hamlet here when asked about the ghost of his father. *Isolation* is when a character produces an unexpected response. With *sublimation*, we ask whether an author or character is channeling repressed desires into something creative. *Displacement* is when we're shifting our emotion from the actual target to something else. *Denial* is refusal to accept reality. *Reversal* is a turn of emotion or fate (think of Oedipus's sudden reversal of fortune in the play, when he learns that he married his mom and killed his dad). *Reaction formation* is a pattern of actions that show denial of reality. Finally, we have the *id*, *ego* and *superego*, which I previously mentioned. Those are important concepts for this type of criticism.

## Slide Eight: Limitations

Psychological criticism can be an interesting approach to a literary text, but it also has some limitations. Some main ones include the following:

- **Subjectivity:** Different readers interpret psychological elements in a text differently. Use an established psychological theory.
- **Authorial Intent:** Inferring an author's psychological state or intentions based on their work can be speculative (but it's okay to look at authorial intent with this type of criticism).
- **Overemphasis on Individual Psychology:** Psychological criticism may focus heavily on individual psychology and neglect broader social, cultural, or historical contexts that also influence literature.
- **Stereotyping Characters:** Applying psychological theories

to characters may lead to oversimplified or stereotypical portrayals. Characters might be reduced to representing specific psychological concepts.

- **Neglect of Formal Elements:** Psychological criticism may sometimes neglect formal elements of a text, such as structure, style, and language, in favor of exploring psychological aspects.
- **Inconsistency in Psychoanalytic Theories:** Different psychoanalytic theories exist, and scholars may apply competing frameworks, leading to inconsistent interpretations (e.g., Freud vs. Jung)
- **Exclusion of Reader Response:** The reader's own psychology and experiences contribute to the meaning derived from a text (subjective reader response)
- **Neglect of Positive Aspects:** Psychological criticism may sometimes focus too much on negative or pathological aspects of characters.

Despite these limitations, psychological criticism can still be an interesting approach to literary texts.

## Slide Nine: Theoretical Responses

For our theoretical response this week, you will choose to work with one of the three texts in “Practicing Psychological Criticism.” Each text also comes with a predetermined psychological approach. You can practice Freud if you want to, but you can also look at Jung or apply a psychological theory that you may not be familiar with. Remember to cite a method source (our textbook or a general source like Psychology Today) if you are doing the Freudian or Jungian approach. For the third text, I have provided you with the method source.

Sometimes students will ask when they apply this approach, “Did the author really mean that?” For example, did Emily

Dickinson really mean to tell us she wished she were a boy? If we are doing a Freudian or Jungian analysis, the answer to this question doesn't really matter because the text is evidence of repressed desires or an unconscious mind.

Another question students ask is whether there's any idea that's off limits or too "out there." Not really, but I do ask you to use your professional judgment when writing this week's analysis. Freud's theories deal explicitly with sexual desire, so we want to maintain a professional distance when applying these to a literary text. But as long as you can justify your interpretation with evidence from the text, any idea is fair game.

I recommend using the checklist in Practicing Psychological Criticism. Also use the questions below the text to help you write your mini essay of 500-750 words. Remember to include a thesis statement that makes an argument about the text using a psychological method. Finally, try to be creative and have fun this week!

As always, if you have any questions, please reach out! I really look forward to seeing your responses and application of these theories.

## 42. Feedback

I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)

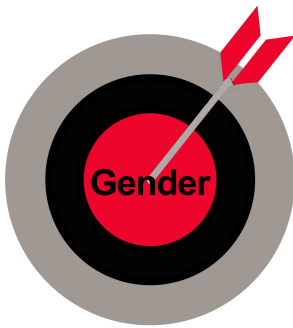


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## SECTION VIII

# GENDER: FEMINIST, POSTFEMINIST, AND QUEER THEORY

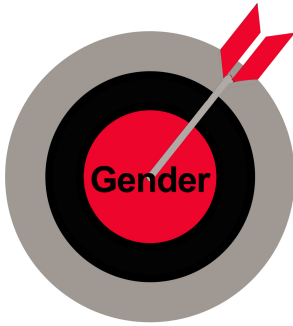


*Feminist, postfeminist, and Queer Theory critical approaches scrutinize literature through diverse lenses, examining gender roles, identities, and power structures while challenging traditional norms, fostering inclusivity, and exploring the intersections of sexuality and identity within narrative*

*frameworks. In the following chapters, you will learn more about this type of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*



# 43. What Are Feminist Criticism, Postfeminist Criticism, and Queer Theory?



If you've heard the word "patriarchy" before (or seen the 2023 *Barbie* movie starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling), you may already be at least a little familiar with feminist criticism. The three critical approaches we will learn about in this section are all concerned fundamentally

with questions of gender, both how sexuality and gender are represented in literary texts and how social constructs of gender affect authors of texts. As with Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies criticism, these three approaches are also concerned with power, but they focus on power imbalances as they relate to gender and sexuality rather than dominant culture, race or class.

## Learning Objectives

- Use a variety of approaches to texts to support interpretations (CLO 1.2)
- Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation (CLO 2.3)
- Be exposed to a variety of critical strategies through literary theory lenses, such as formalism/ New Criticism, reader-response, structuralism, deconstruction, historical and cultural approaches (New Historicism, postcolonial, Marxism), psychological approaches, feminism, and queer theory (CLO 4.1)
- Understand how context impacts the reading of a text, and how different contexts can bring about different readings (CLO 4.3)
- Demonstrate awareness of critical approaches by pairing them with texts in productive and illuminating ways (CLO 5.5)
- Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing how textual interpretation can change given the context from which one reads (CLO 6.2)
- Understand that interpretation is inherently political, and that it reveals assumptions and expectations about value, truth, and the human experience (CLO 7.1)

## **Feminist Criticism**

Feminist criticism is a critical approach to literature that seeks to understand how gender and sexuality shape the meaning and representation of literary texts. While feminist criticism has its roots in the 1800s (First Wave), it became a critical force in the early 1970s (Second Wave) as part of the broader feminist movement and continues to be an important and influential approach to literary analysis.

Feminist critics explore the ways in which literature reflects and reinforces gender roles and expectations, as well as the ways in which it can challenge and subvert them. They examine the representation of female characters and the ways in which they are portrayed in relation to male characters, as well as the representation of gender and sexuality more broadly. With feminist criticism, we may consider both the woman as writer and the written woman.

As with New Historicism and Cultural Studies criticism, one of the key principles of feminist criticism is the idea that literature is not a neutral or objective reflection of reality, but rather, literary texts are shaped by the social and cultural context in which they are produced. Feminist critics are interested in gender stereotypes, exploring how literature reflects and reinforces patriarchal power structures and how it can be used to challenge and transform these structures.

## **Postfeminist Criticism**

Postfeminist criticism is a critical approach to literature that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s as a response to earlier feminist literary criticism. It acknowledges the gains of feminism in terms of women's rights and gender equality, but

also recognizes that these gains have been uneven and that new forms of gender inequality have emerged.

The “post” in postfeminist can be understood like the “post” in post-structuralism or postcolonialism. Postfeminist critics are interested in exploring the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed and represented in literature, but they also pay attention to the ways in which other factors such as race, class, and age intersect with gender to shape experiences and identities. They seek to move beyond the binary categories of male/female and masculine/feminine, and to explore the ways in which gender identity and expression are fluid and varied.

Postfeminist criticism also pays attention to the ways in which contemporary culture, including literature and popular media, reflects and shapes attitudes towards gender and sexuality. It explores the ways in which these representations can be empowering or constraining and seeks to identify and challenge problematic representations of gender and sexuality.

One of the key principles of postfeminist criticism is the importance of diversity and inclusivity. Postfeminist critics are interested in exploring the experiences of individuals who have been marginalized or excluded by traditional feminist discourse, including women of color, queer and trans individuals, and working-class women. If you are familiar with the *American Dirt* controversy, where Oprah’s book pick was widely criticized because the author was a white woman, is an example of this type of approach.

## Queer Theory

Queer theory is a critical approach to literature and culture that seeks to challenge and destabilize dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality. It emerged in the 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional gay and lesbian

studies, which tended to focus on issues of identity and representation within a binary understanding of gender and sexuality. According to Jennifer Miller,

“The film theorist Teresa de Lauretis (figure 1.1) coined the term at a University of California, Santa Cruz, conference about lesbian and gay sexualities in February 1990.... In her introduction to the special issue, de Lauretis outlines the central features of queer theory, sketching the field in broad strokes that have held up remarkably well.”

While queer theory was formalized as a critical approach in 1990, scholars built on earlier ideas from Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, as well as the works of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and others.

Queer theory is interested in exploring the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed and performative, rather than innate or essential. As with feminist and postfeminist criticism, queer theory seeks to expose the ways in which these constructions are shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors, but additionally, queer theory seeks to challenge the rigid binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Queer theory also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, or the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect with other forms of identity such as race, class, and ability. It seeks to uncover the complex and nuanced ways in which multiple forms of oppression and privilege intersect.

Queer theory focuses on the importance of resistance and subversion. Scholars are interested in exploring the ways in which marginalized individuals and communities have resisted and subverted the dominant culture's norms and values, observing how these acts of resistance and subversion can be empowering and transformative.

## Scholarship: Examples from Feminist, Postfeminist, and Queer Theory Critics

Feminist criticism could technically be considered to be as old as writing. Since Sappho of Lesbos wrote her famous lyrics, women authors have been an active and important part of their cultures' literary traditions. Why, then, are we sometimes not as familiar with the works of women authors? One of the earliest feminist critics is the French existentialist philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). In her important book, *The Second Sex*, she lays the groundwork for feminist literary criticism by considering how in most societies, "man" is normal, and "woman" is "the Other." You may have heard this famous quote: "One is not born a woman but becomes one." (French: "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient"). This phrase encapsulates the essential feminist idea that "woman" is a social construct.

### Feminist: Excerpt from Introduction to *The Second Sex* (1949), translated by H.M. Parshley

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through 'the eternal feminine', and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question "what is a woman"?

To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never set out to write a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself,



I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: 'You think thus and so because you are a woman'; but I know that my only defence is to reply: 'I think thus and so because it is true,' thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: 'And you think the contrary because you are a man', for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete 3 hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal

connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. 'The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' said Aristotle; 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolised in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: 'Woman, the relative being ...' And Benda is most positive in his *Rapport d'Uriel*: 'The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.' And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.'

The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other. This duality was not originally

attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dumézil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.

Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travellers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged.

Excerpt from *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (translated by H.M. Parshley) is licensed All Rights Reserved and is used here under Fair Use exception.

How do you feel about de Beauvoir's conception of woman as "Other"? How are her approaches to gender similar to what we have learned about deconstruction and New Historicism? Could feminist criticism, like Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies criticism, also be thought of as having "power" as its central concern?

Let's move on to postfeminist criticism. When you think of

Emily Dickinson, sadomasochism is probably the last thing that comes to mind, unless you're postfeminist scholar and critic Camille Paglia. No stranger to culture wars, Paglia has often courted controversy; a 2012 *New York Times* article noted that "[a]nyone who has been following the body count of the culture wars over the past decades knows Paglia." Paglia continues to write and publish both scholarship and popular works. Her fourth essay collection, *Provocations: Collected Essays on Art, Feminism, Politics, Sex, and Education*, was published by Pantheon in 2018.

This excerpt from her 1990 book *Sexual Personae*, which drew on her doctoral dissertation research, demonstrates Paglia's creative and confrontational approach to scholarship.

## Postfeminist: Excerpt from "Amherst's Madame de Sade" in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* by Camille Paglia (1990)

Consciousness in Dickinson takes the form of a body tormented in every limb. Her sadomasochistic metaphors are Blake's Universal Man hammering on himself, like the auctioneering Jesus. Her suffering personae make up the gorged superself of Romanticism. I argued that modern sadomasochism is a limitation of the will and that for a Romantic like the mastectomy-obsessed Kleist it represents a reduction of self. A conventional feminist critique of Emily Dickinson's life would see her hemmed in on all sides by respectability and paternalism, impediments to her genius. But a study of Romanticism shows that post-Enlightenment poets are struggling with the absence of limits, with the gross inflation of solipsistic

imagination. Hence Dickinson's most uncontrolled encounter is with the serpent of her antisocial self, who breaks out like the Aeolian winds let out of their bag.

Dickinson does wage guerrilla warfare with society. Her fractures,cripplings, impalements, and amputations are Dionysian disorderings of the stable structures of the Apollonian lawgivers. God, or the idea of God, is the "One," without whom the "Many" of nature fly apart. Hence God's death condemns the world to Decadent disintegration. Dickinson's Late Romantic love of the apocalyptic parallels Decadent European taste for salon paintings of the fall of Babylon or Rome. Her Dionysian cataclysms demolish Victorian proprieties. Like Blake, she couples the miniature and grandiose, great disjunctions of scale whose yawing swings release tremendous poetic energy.

The least palatable principle of the Dionysian, I have stressed, is not sex but violence, which Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Emerson exclude from their view of nature. Dickinson, like Sade, draws the reader into ascending degrees of complicity, from eroticism to rape, mutilation, and murder. With Emily Brontë, she uncovers the aggression repressed by humanism. Hence Dickinson is the creator of Sadean poems but also the creator of sadists, the readers whom she smears with her lamb's blood. Like the Passover angel, she stains the lintels of the bourgeois home with her bloody vision. "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House," she announces with a satisfaction completely overlooked by the Wordsworthian reader (389).

But merely because poet and modern society are in conflict does not mean art necessarily gains by "freedom." It is a sentimental error to think Emily Dickinson the victim of male obstructionism. Without her struggle with God and father, there would have

been no poetry. There are two reasons for this. First, Romanticism's overexpanded self requires artificial restraints. Dickinson finds these limitations in sadomasochistic nature and reproduces them in her dual style. Without such a discipline, the Romantic poet cannot take a single step, for the sterile vastness of modern freedom is like gravity-free outer space, in which one cannot walk or run. Second, women do not rise to supreme achievement unless they are under powerful internal compulsion. Dickinson was a woman of abnormal will. Her poetry profits from the enormous disparity between that will and the feminine social persona to which she fell heir at birth. But her sadism is not anger, the *a posteriori* response to social injustice. It is hostility, an *a priori* Achillean intolerance for the existence of others, the female version of Romantic solipsism.

Excerpt from *Sexual Personae* by Camille Paglia is licensed All Rights Reserved and is used here under Fair Use exception.

It's important to note that these critical approaches can be applied to works from any time period, as the title of Paglia's book makes clear. In this sense, post-feminist scholarship is similar to deconstruction and borrows many of its methods. After reading this passage, do you feel the same way about Emily Dickinson's poetry? How does Paglia's postfeminist approach differ from Simone de Beauvoir's approach to feminism?

Our final reading is from Judith Butler, who is considered both a feminist scholar and a foundational queer theorist. Their 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is considered an essential queer theory text. Expanding on the ideas about gender and performativity, *Bodies that Matter* (2011) deconstructs the binary sex/gender

distinctions that we see in the works of earlier feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir.

## Queer Theory: Excerpt from “Introduction,” *Bodies that Matter* by Judith Butler (2011)

Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin? -Donna Haraway, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*

If one really thinks about the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such.

There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it. -Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a Word,” interview with Ellen Rooney

There is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization.

-Jacques Derrida, *Donner le Temps*

Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender? And how does the category of “sex” figure within such a relationship? Consider first that sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences. Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences that are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Further, to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference. The category “sex” is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal.” In this sense, then, “sex”

not only functions as a norm but also is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce-demarcate, circulate, differentiate-the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.

But how, then, does the notion of gender performativity relate to this conception of materialization? In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.

In this sense, what constitutes the fixity of the body,



its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand "gender" as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as "the body" or its given sex. Rather, once "sex" itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. "Sex" is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.

At stake in such a reformulation of the materiality of bodies will be the following: (1) the recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects; (2) the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains; (3) the construal of "sex" no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies; (4) a rethinking of the process by which a bodily norm is assumed, appropriated, taken on as not, strictly speaking, undergone by a subject, but rather that the subject, the speaking "I," is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex; and (5) a linking of this process of "assuming" a sex with the question of identification, and with the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed

identifications and forecloses and/ or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life, which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreadful identification against which-and by virtue of which-the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation.

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of “sex,” and this identification takes place through a repudiation that produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation that creates the valence of “abjection” and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre. Further, the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern the regulation of identificatory practices such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed. And yet, this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in repudiation whose consequences it cannot

fully control. The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.

Lastly, the mobilization of the categories of sex within political discourse will be haunted in some ways by the very instabilities that the categories effectively produce and foreclose. Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation. Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminists and queer politics are mobilized. Such collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern.

Excerpt from *Bodies that Matter* by Judith Butler is licensed All Rights Reserved and is used here under Fair Use exception.

You can see in Butler's work how deconstruction plays a role in queer theory approaches to texts. What do you think of her approach to sexuality and gender? Which bodies matter? Why is this question important for literary scholars, and how can we use literary texts to answer the question?

In our next section, we'll look at some ways that these theories can be used to analyze literary texts.

## Using Feminist, Postfeminist, and Queer

# Theory as a Critical Approach

As you can see from the introduction and the examples of scholarship that we read, there's some overlap in the concepts of these three critical approaches. One of the first choices you have to make when working with a text is deciding which theory to use. Below I've outlined some ideas that you might explore.

## Feminist

1. **Character Analysis:** Examine the portrayal of characters, paying attention to how gender roles and stereotypes shape their identities. Consider the agency, autonomy, and representation of both male and female characters, and analyze how their interactions contribute to or challenge traditional gender norms.
2. **Theme Exploration:** Investigate themes related to gender, power dynamics, and patriarchy within the text. Explore how the narrative addresses issues such as sexism, women's rights, and the construction of femininity and masculinity. Consider how the themes may reflect or critique societal attitudes towards gender.
3. **Language and Symbolism:** Analyze the language used in the text, including the representation of gender through linguistic choices. Examine symbols and metaphors related to gender and sexuality. Identify instances of language that may reinforce or subvert traditional gender roles, and explore how these linguistic elements contribute to the overall meaning of the work.
4. **Authorial Intent and Context:** Investigate the author's background, motivations, and societal context. Consider how the author's personal experiences and the cultural

milieu may have influenced their portrayal of gender. Analyze the author's stance on feminist issues and whether the text aligns with or challenges feminist principles.

5. **Intersectionality:** Take an intersectional approach by considering how factors such as race, class, sexuality, and other identity markers intersect with gender in the text. Explore how different forms of oppression and privilege intersect, shaping the experiences of characters and influencing the overall thematic landscape of the literary work.

## Postfeminist

1. **Interrogating Postfeminist Tropes:** Examine the text for elements that align with or challenge postfeminist tropes, such as the notion of individual empowerment, choice feminism, or the idea that traditional gender roles are no longer relevant. Analyze how the narrative engages with or subverts these postfeminist ideals.
2. **Exploring Ambiguities and Contradictions:** Investigate contradictions and ambiguities within the text regarding gender and sexuality. Postfeminist criticism often acknowledges the complexities of contemporary gender dynamics, so analyze instances where the text may present conflicting perspectives on issues like agency, equality, and empowerment.
3. **Media and Pop Culture Influences:** Consider the influence of media and popular culture on the text. Postfeminist criticism often examines how cultural narratives and media representations of gender impact literature. Analyze how the text responds to or reflects contemporary media portrayals of gender roles and expectations.
4. **Global and Cultural Perspectives:** Take a global and

cultural perspective by exploring how the text addresses postfeminist ideas in different cultural contexts. Analyze how the narrative engages with issues of globalization, intersectionality, and diverse cultural perspectives on gender and feminism.

5. **Temporal Considerations:** Examine how the temporal setting of the text influences its engagement with postfeminist ideas. Consider whether the narrative reflects a specific historical moment or if it transcends temporal boundaries. Analyze how societal shifts over time may be reflected in the text's treatment of gender issues.

## Queer Theory

1. **Deconstructing Norms and Binaries:** Utilize Queer Theory to deconstruct traditional norms and binaries related to gender and sexuality within the text. Explore how the narrative challenges or reinforces heteronormative assumptions, and analyze characters or relationships that subvert or resist conventional categories.
2. **Examining Queer Identities:** Focus on the exploration and representation of queer identities within the text. Consider how characters navigate and express their sexualities and gender identities. Analyze the nuances of queer experiences and the ways in which the text contributes to a more expansive understanding of LGBTQ+ identities.
3. **Language and Subversion:** Analyze the language used in the text with a Queer Theory lens. Examine linguistic choices that challenge or reinforce societal norms related to gender and sexuality. Explore how the text employs language to subvert or resist heteronormative structures.
4. **Queer Time and Space:** Consider how the concept of queer time and space is represented in the text. Queer Theory often explores non-linear or non-normative

temporalities and spatialities. Analyze how the narrative disrupts conventional timelines or spatial arrangements to create alternative queer realities.

5. **Intersectionality within Queer Narratives:** Take an intersectional approach within the framework of Queer Theory. Analyze how factors such as race, class, and ethnicity intersect with queer identities in the text. Explore the intersections of different marginalized identities to understand the complexities of lived experiences.

## Applying Gender Criticisms to Literary Texts

As with our other critical approaches, we will start with a close reading of the poem below (we'll do this together in class or as part of the recorded lecture for this chapter). In your close reading, you'll focus on gender, stereotypes, the patriarchy, heteronormative writing, etc. With feminist, postfeminist, and queer theory criticism, you might look to outside sources, especially if you are considering the author's gender identity or sexuality, or you might bring your own knowledge and lived experience to the text.

The poem below was written by Mary Robinson, an early Romantic English poet. Though her works were quite popular when she was alive, you may not have heard of her. However, you're probably familiar with her male contemporaries William Blake, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, or Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Keep in mind that reading this poem is thus itself a feminist act. When we choose to include historical voices of woman that were previously excluded, we are doing feminist criticism.

## “January, 1795”

BY MARY ROBINSON

Pavement slipp’ry,  
people sneezing,  
Lords in ermine, beggars  
freezing;  
Titled gluttons dainties  
carving,  
Genius in a garret  
starving.

Lofty mansions, warm  
and spacious;  
Courtiers cringing and  
voracious;  
Misers scarce the  
wretched heeding;  
Gallant soldiers fighting, bleeding.

Wives who laugh at passive spouses;  
Theatres, and meeting-houses;  
Balls, where simp’ring misses languish;  
Hospitals, and groans of anguish.

Arts and sciences bewailing;  
Commerce drooping, credit failing;  
Placemen mocking subjects loyal;  
Separations, weddings royal.



*Portrait of Mary Robinson By  
Joshua Reynolds, Public  
Domain*



Authors who can't earn a dinner;  
Many a subtle rogue a winner;  
Fugitives for shelter seeking;  
Misers hoarding, tradesmen breaking.

Taste and talents quite deserted;  
All the laws of truth perverted;  
Arrogance o'er merit soaring;  
Merit silently deploring.

Ladies gambling night and morning;  
Fools the works of genius scorning;  
Ancient dames for girls mistaken,  
Youthful damsels quite forsaken.

Some in luxury delighting;  
More in talking than in fighting;  
Lovers old, and beaux decrepid;  
Lordlings empty and insipid.

Poets, painters, and musicians;  
Lawyers, doctors, politicians:  
Pamphlets, newspapers, and odes,  
Seeking fame by diff'rent roads.

Gallant souls with empty purses;  
Gen'ral's only fit for nurses;  
School-boys, smit with martial spirit,  
Taking place of vet'ran merit.

Honest men who can't get places,  
Knaves who shew unblushing faces;  
Ruin hasten'd, peace retarded;  
Candor spurn'd, and art rewarded.

*"January, 1795" by Mary Robinson is in the Public Domain.*

## Questions (Feminist and Postfeminist Criticism)

1. What evidence of gender stereotypes can you find in the text?
2. What evidence of patriarchy and power structure do you see? How is this evidence supported by historical context? Consider, for example, the 1794 contemporary poem “London” by William Blake. These two poems have similar themes. How does the male poet Blake’s treatment of this theme compare with the female poet Mary Robinson’s work? How have these two works and authors differed in their critical reception?
3. Who is the likely contemporary audience for Mary Robinson’s poetry? Who is the audience today? What about the audience during the 1940s and 50s, when New Criticism was popular? How would these three audiences view feminism, patriarchy, and gender roles differently?
4. Do a search for Mary Robinson’s work in JSTOR. Then do a search for William Blake. How do the two authors compare in terms of scholarship produced on their work? Do you see anything significant about the dates of the scholarship? The authors? The critical lenses that are applied?
5. Do you see any contradictions and ambiguities within the text regarding gender and sexuality? What about evidence for subversion of traditional gender roles?

**Example of a feminist thesis statement:** While William Blake’s “London” and Mary Robinson’s

“January, 1795” share similar themes with similar levels of artistry, Robinson’s work and critical reception demonstrates the effects of 18th-century patriarchal power structures that kept even the most brilliant women in their place.

**Example of a postfeminist thesis statement:**

Mary Robinson’s “January, 1795” slyly subverts gender norms and expectations with a brilliance that transcends the confines of traditional eighteenth century gender roles.

To practice queer theory, let’s turn to a more contemporary text. “The Eyepatch” by transgender author and scholar Cassandra Arc follows a gender-neutral protagonist as they navigate an ambiguous space. This short story questions who sees and who is seen in heteronormative spaces, as well as exploring what it means to see yourself as queer.

## “The Eyepatch”

The lightning didn’t kill me, though it should’ve. The bolt pierced my eyes, gifted curse from Zeus or Typhon or God. I remember waking up in that hospital, everything was black. I felt bandages, pain, fire. I tried

to sit up, but a hand gently pushed me back into the bed. I heard the shuffling of feet and the sound of scrubs rubbing against each other. I smelled the pungent disinfectant in the air. I heard the slow methodical beep of a heart rate monitor. That incessant blip-blip-blip was my heart rate. I heard the thunder of my heart beating to the same methodical rhythm. A metronome to a wordless melody of ignorance, an elegy to blindness.

I wasn't awake long. They put me back to sleep. To salvage my face. My burned face, my charred face. I should've died. The next time I woke the bandages were gone. I could see the doctors, but I couldn't see me. They wouldn't let me see me, told me they would fix my face, make it look good again. I didn't trust them. The doctors thought their faces were pretty. They weren't. I asked to see my face. They wouldn't let me. I'm lucky to be alive, that's what they said. I'm lucky I can see.

But some things I can't see. They left the eyepatch on my left eye. Told me the left eye would never work again. My right eye can't see everything. It sees the doctors, their heads swathed in sterile caps, their wrinkled noses, their empty eyes. It sees the nurses, their exhaustion, their bitterness. It sees the bleak beige walls and the tiny tinny television hanging in the corner by the laminated wood door. It sees the plastic bag of fluid hanging from the metal rack on wheels, the plastic instruments and the fluorescent light panel above my head. But it can't see my mom, it can't see my sister. It can't see myself. They never believe me.

My mom comes to visit me on the third day I'm awake. I hear her enter, smell her usual perfume, lilac with a hint of dirt and rain. I feel her hand hold mine, warmth and comfort and kindness. My right eye can't see her. She came from the garden to see me, to make sure I'm okay. My right eye can't see my mom. The doctors don't believe me. My mom believes me.

The doctors pull her away from me. They say they need to fix my face. She can see me tomorrow. I smell the anesthesia and hear the spurt of the needle as they test to make sure no air bubbles formed in the syringe. I hear my mom crying. She assures me she'll come back tomorrow. I can't see her tears. They put me back to sleep.

In my dreams I can see them, my mother and sister. There is no eyepatch on my left eye; it can see them, and it can see me, reflected in the water. We swim across the pond to the island with the tree in the center. The reeds grow tall along the banks. The water smells of fish shit and moss. the reflection is murky except for the shallow blue eyes.

The reflection is broken by a ripple. My sister swims to me, wraps her arms around me, then splashes water directly into my face. Some droplets stick to my forehead and nose, like beads of cold sweat. She giggles, a grin emerges on her freckled face. Her wet blonde hair has strands of moss hanging from it. I smile back and with a quick flick of my wrist she too is drenched. I feel peace from the water. My mother calls us to shore. Storm clouds, she says. The lightning might kill you. That's what she said then. I didn't believe her. Thunder echoes like the heartbeat of the sky.

The doctors wake me up. They have thunder too. I cannot see them, can't see anything. Bandages surround my face. My face is fixed. That's what they claim. I didn't see anything wrong before. They wouldn't let me see me. It's a miracle. I'm lucky to be alive. I don't believe them. They apologize for not being able to fix my eye.

My sister comes with my mom today. I can't see her. She believes me, reminds me about the lightning. It could've killed me. When she learns I can't see her, she cackles. She says she'll have fun when I come home. She asks when I'll come home.

I don't know when I'll come home. The doctors don't know. I should've died. They want to keep me. My mother wants to take me. They shout at each other. My sister holds my left hand. I can't see her hand, or mine.

The doctors remove the bandages. They show me a mirror. I see behind me, but I don't see *me*. I see the eyepatch float. When I try to remove it the doctors stop me. My eye is too damaged. They tell me to never remove the eyepatch. They hold up a vase. My mom brought me flowers. I can't see the flowers. They don't believe me. Their voices are angry. Stop being childish, they say. I lie and say I see the flowers.

Once one of the nurses I can't see, he brought me food from outside. I saw the bag float in the room. I heard his footsteps. He handed me the brown paper bag and told me to enjoy. He sounded old. I felt a band of metal on his left-hand ring finger when I took the bag. The smell of chicken nuggets and French fries pierced the stale aroma of bleach and disinfectant. I

heard the edge of the bed creak, the cushion indented slightly. The invisible nurse told wild tales of dragons and monsters while I ate. He didn't know when I'll be home. He watered invisible flowers before leaving. I fell back asleep.

In my dreams I'm still swimming. The sun is blocked by clouds. Drops of rain hit my hair. Mother calls from the cabin on the shore. My sister runs out of the water, her leg kicks water into my eyes. I'm blinded for a moment. I don't leave. I stay in the water, dropping my eyes level with the water. They both hear the thunder. I don't hear the thunder. They both see the lightning.

All I feel is heat. I'm blind. The lightning should've killed me. The lightning in my eyes, lucky to be alive. My sister screams for help. Smell the ozone. Pungent and sweet. I don't scream, I can't scream. I'm dead. I'm alive. The lightning killed me. I can't see my mom. I can't see my sister. I can't see the flowers. The lightning saved me. I can see the doctors, I can see the nurses, I can see the hospital.

The lightning killed me, that's what they said. They brought me back with lightning, pads of metal, artificial energy. My eye is broken, the one the lightning struck. Three minutes. That's what they told me. Three minutes of death. My face was burned. I can't see it. They fixed it.

The doctors worried my body was broken too. The lightning still might kill me. They say I need to move, I need to walk. Lightning causes paralysis, or weakness. They bring in a special doctor. I can't see this doctor. The other doctors leave. The invisible doctor takes me

to a room for walking practice. I think I walk just fine. They hold me anyway. Crutches line the walls, pairs of metal handrails take up the center, and exercise equipment sits off to the right side. The invisible doctor lets go and I fall. My hands are too slow to catch me. My face hits one of the many black foam squares that make up the floor. I turn my head left and see the eyepatch almost fall off in the mirror on the wall. For a second, I think I see me, but I can't see me. The invisible doctor fixes it and helps me to my feet. They tell me to be like a tree, that I'll be okay. That I'll be able to walk again soon. They tell me when I can walk I will go home. I place my hands on the rails. The metal is cold. The doctor yelps in shock and withdraws their hand; it was just static. My arms are weak but they hold me. My legs move slowly, but I can't walk without the rails.

The invisible doctor takes me back after a while. They tell me I did good work. It's a miracle I can still move. They tell me lightning takes people's movement. The lightning should've killed me. That's what they say. They tell me strength should come back to me. Lightning steals that too. Lightning can't keep strength like it keeps movement.

My mom comes back again. She brings me the manatee, Juno. I can see Juno. Soft gray fabric, small black plastic eyes. I hold her tightly in my arms. Mom wants me home. The doctors still won't let her take me. Juno will keep me safe, that's what she said. She brings me homework too, and videos of teachers explaining how the world works. I can see them. I can't see my mom.

I miss the smell of earth when my mom leaves. I want



to smell her garden again. To swim in the pond and feel the moss brush against my skin. I want to feel the peace of the water and hear the crickets sing their lullaby. The invisible doctor tells me I will. They tell me I need to steal my strength from the lightning. They take me back to that room for walking. I only need one hand to guide me now. They tell me I'll go home soon. They tell me I'm stronger than lightning. I still can't see them.

Back in my room I learn about lightning. It's hotter than the sun. I remember the heat I felt and wonder if that's how it feels to touch the surface of a star. The video says that direct strikes are usually fatal. I'm lucky to be alive. I hold Juno tightly.

It takes a month to steal my strength back from the lightning. I walk without holding the rails. The invisible doctor applauds me and tells me I'm ready to go home. They call my mom. I still can't see my mom.

I can't see the trees with my right eye, my good eye. I know where they should be by the shaded patches of dirt in the ground. I can see the grass, the road, the dirt covered green Volvo Station wagon, Mom's car. My sister shouts for joy and runs toward me. I fall to the ground. Her arms squeeze Juno into my chest. I can't see my sister.

Mom drives me to the cabin. I can see the towering buildings of the city. In the reflection of the tinted glass, I see the station wagon. The eyepatch floats in the window right above Juno's head. Mom tells me about what she'll make for dinner. She killed one of the chickens and plucked carrots and celery from the

ground. Soup gives strength. That's what she said. She reminds me that I'm lucky to be alive.

I can't see the reeds. Mom stops the car in front of the cabin. I can't see the cabin, nor the rustic wood threshold. Mom helps me across it. The hand-carved wooden table is invisible, but I can see the small electric stove. I smell the soup, hear the water boil, guide my hand along the wood of the narrow hallway to help me walk. I can't see my bedroom, nor the bed alcove carved into the wall. My mattress floats in the air as if by magic. I can see the plastic desk my mom bought me for school, and the lightbulb in the ceiling. I see wires in invisible walls.

My sister wants to play. She tugs on my arm. I set Juno into the bed alcove and feel my way back to the main room. Mom reminds me to be careful. She tells my sister to be gentle. She reminds us both that I can't take off my eyepatch. We both take off our shoes.

My sister guides me to the shore. I enjoy the sensation of dirt beneath my feet and the occasional pain of a rock. We move slowly, some of my strength still belongs to the lightning. She runs in. I can't see the pond. I can't see the moss in the pond. I can't see my sister. My sister asks about the eyepatch. She wants to know why I can't take it off. I don't know. She asks about my eye. The dark one. The one filled with abyss. The right eye. She asks why it's dark. I don't know. I put my foot in the invisible water. My sister jumps out. Something shocked her. She thinks I shocked her. She gets back in.

I stay close to the shore I can't see. I don't want to

drown. I don't want my eyes near the water. There are no storm clouds today. I fiddle with moss between my toes. Mom calls us in for dinner. My sister runs ahead. I try walking on my own. I trip over a tree root that I couldn't see. I fall and hit my chin on the ground. The eyepatch slides up a bit. I quickly push it back down before it can come off. I can't take off my eyepatch.

My mom hears the thud and comes running. She helps me to my feet, guides me back to the cabin, and sits me at the table. She brings me a bowl of soup, tells me I need to be careful. She wants me to stay alive. I sip the soup and listen to her sing while she cleans the soup pot. I can't see my mom.

When I sleep, I dream of before. Before the lightning stole my left eye. Before it stole my strength. I dream of the pond. I dream of the old willow tree on the island. Its dark drooping branches blossoming every spring. The leaves fall on the pond. Nature's Navy of little boats. The tree is stronger than lightning. I am the tree. I want to see the tree again.

My sister tells me she'll guide me to the island. I refuse. I can't see the tree, or the water. My eyes would have to be close to it. The eyepatch might come off. I spend the day holding Juno. My mom brings me a sandwich and sits with me a while. I only know she's there from the sound of her bouncing leg. She's nervous. She doesn't smell of the garden yet. She won't smell of the garden today. I want to smell of the garden, but I can't see the garden.

In the evening I sit outside the cabin and listen to the crickets. I'm lucky to be alive. The lightning didn't kill

me. I scratch at an itch under the eyepatch. I feel a shock in my hand and pull it back. I smell the ozone on my fingertip. In my mind I'm in the water again. I remember the heat, the pain. My mom comes running when I scream. She puts Juno in my arms. I feel safe again. I am stronger than the lightning. The lightning didn't kill me.

While I sleep I am the tree, standing tall, guarding my island. The lightning wants to take it. It strikes at the water around me, burning my Navy of leaves. Once it struck me, but the rain extinguished its flames. I grew back stronger. My Navy rebuilt. The lightning always comes back. I am always stronger.

My sister and I play in the lake. I go out deeper today. My legs can tell how deep I am. We go to the tree. The lightning couldn't steal the ability to swim. I follow the sound of my sister's splashing. We push through invisible reeds, I feel the plants surround me. My sister holds my hand and guides me through the canopy of branches. I feel the incomplete ships of Nature's Navy brush against my face. She puts my hand against the tree. I guide my hand along it until I find the once charred wood where lightning burned it. The lightning should've killed us.

My sister and I sit under the tree for a while. I feel the bugs occasionally crawl across my hands. She rests her shoulder on mine. I'm lucky to be alive. The lightning didn't kill us.

We walk back to the shore. I feel the water, and one of Nature's boats brush against my foot and look down. I still can't see the water. I can't see myself. I can see the

Navy. The floating leaves atop the tranquil pond. The tears begin to fall. My sister asks why the tears from beneath the eyepatch are white as ash. I wish I knew.

The crickets sing again that evening. Tonight, they sing the ballad of the tree. Loud and harmonic. I whisper my thanks into the wind. The crickets whistle back. They believe me.

In the morning I wake up before anyone else. I shuffle through the halls and out to the porch to listen to the morning bird song. I let my head weave side to side in tune with their melody. I dance across invisible dirt. A laugh escapes my lips. I jump into invisible water. I sail with Nature's Navy to the tree.

My soul sits atop resilient roots. Hands find the burned wood, where the lightning almost killed it. I bring the left hand to the eyepatch, where the lightning almost killed me. The wind blows through the leaves. Splashes echo from the opposite shore, sounds of someone swimming. Thunder echoes from my stomach, I rise to return home. Gallivanting down the invisible slope back towards my invisible home.

I trip across a root near the water. The eyepatch sinks beneath the surface of the lake. I yank my head back. The eyepatch slips off. My left hand covers my eye. A shock forces me to pull it away. The eyelid flutters opened. I see the lightning. Nature's Navy set ablaze by my gaze. My eye touches the sun again as the lightning leaves. The tree set ablaze by my gaze. The crickets echo a lament. The birds resound a harmonizing elegy. The drooping branches fall lower, as if bowing. I bow in return. The splashing water calms.

My left eye sees the water, sees the earth, sees myself. Authentic and whole. It observes my leaves of joy, fingers stretched in shallows. My left eye witnesses my roots of kindness, feet planted on solid shores. It beholds the resilience of my trunk, a beautiful body. The eyepatch floats in the water. I perceive my eyes again, the dark one and the white. my black and white tears drift across the surface of water. Someone shuffles the dirt behind me. I turn with a smile on my face.

*Cassandra Arc is an autistic trans woman living in Portland, Oregon. In her writing she likes to focus on themes of healing, gender identity issues, and nature as a means of understanding authenticity. This story was originally published in the Talking River Review and is reprinted here by permission of the author (All Rights Reserved).*

## Questions

1. Who is the narrator of this story? What do we know about their gender? How do we know this? What does the lightning signify?
2. What does the eyepatch represent? When the narrator says, "I see behind me, but I don't see *me*," what does this mean? What ideas about social constructs are present in this narrative, and how does the story subvert those social constructs?
3. How do characters navigate and express their gender identities in the text? Does the story expand your understanding of the queer experience? In what ways? What do you think about the way some things can't be

seen and some things can in the story? How might this experience relate to being queer?

4. How are time and space treated in this story?
5. How does the story subvert or resist conventional categories?

**Example of a queer theory thesis statement:** In “The Eyepatch” by Cassandra Arc, the binary oppositions of light, darkness, sight, and blindness are used to subvert heteronormative structures, deconstructing artificially constructed binaries to capture the experience of being in the closet and the explosive nature of coming out.

## Limitations of Gender Criticisms

While these approaches offer interesting and important insights into the ways that gender and sexuality exist in texts, they also have some limitations. Here are some potential drawbacks:

### Feminist Criticism

1. **Essentialism:** Feminist theory may sometimes be criticized for essentializing gender experiences, assuming a universal women’s experience that overlooks the diversity of women’s lives.
2. **Neglect of Other Identities:** The focus on gender in

feminist theory may overshadow other intersecting identities such as race, class, and sexuality, limiting the analysis of how these factors contribute to oppression or privilege.

3. **Overlooking Male Perspectives:** In some instances, feminist theory may be perceived as neglecting the examination of male characters or perspectives, potentially reinforcing gender binaries rather than deconstructing them.
4. **Historical and Cultural Context:** Feminist theory, while valuable, may not always adequately address the historical and cultural contexts of literary works, potentially overlooking shifts in societal attitudes towards gender over time.

## Postfeminist Criticism

1. **Oversimplification of Feminist Goals:** Post-feminist criticism may be criticized for oversimplifying or prematurely declaring the achievement of feminist goals, potentially obscuring persistent gender inequalities.
2. **Individualism and Choice Feminism:** The emphasis on individual empowerment in post-feminist criticism, often associated with choice feminism, may overlook systemic issues and structural inequalities that continue to affect women's lives.
3. **Lack of Intersectionality:** Post-feminist approaches may sometimes neglect intersectionality, overlooking the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, and other identity factors, which can limit a comprehensive understanding of oppression.
4. **Commodification of Feminism:** Critics argue that post-feminism can lead to the commodification of feminist ideals, with feminist imagery and language used for



commercial purposes, potentially diluting the transformative goals of feminism.

## Queer Theory

1. **Complexity and Jargon:** Queer Theory can be complex and may use specialized language, making it challenging for some readers to engage with and understand, potentially creating barriers to entry for students and scholars.
2. **Overemphasis on Textual Deconstruction:** Critics argue that Queer Theory may sometimes prioritize textual deconstruction over concrete political action, leading to concerns about the practical impact of this theoretical approach on real-world LGBTQ+ issues.
3. **Challenges in Application:** Queer Theory's emphasis on fluidity and resistance to fixed categories can make it challenging to apply consistently, as it may resist clear definitions and frameworks, making it more subjective in its interpretation.
4. **Limited Representation:** While Queer Theory aims to deconstruct norms, some critics argue that it may still primarily focus on certain aspects of queer experiences, potentially neglecting the diversity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum and reinforcing certain stereotypes.

## Gender Scholars

### Feminist

- **Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986):** A French existentialist philosopher and writer, de Beauvoir is best known for her groundbreaking work “The Second Sex,” which explored the oppression of women and laid the groundwork for feminist literary theory.
- **Virginia Woolf (1882-1941):** A celebrated English writer, Woolf is known for her novels such as “Mrs. Dalloway” and “Orlando.” Her works often engaged with feminist themes and issues of gender identity.
- **bell hooks (1952-2021):** An American author, feminist, and social activist, hooks wrote extensively on issues of race, class, and gender. Her works, such as “Ain’t I a Woman” and “The Feminist Theory from Margin to Center,” are essential in feminist scholarship.
- **Adrienne Rich (1929-2012):** An American poet and essayist, Rich’s poetry and prose explored themes of feminism, identity, and social justice. Her collection of essays, “Of Woman Born,” is a notable work in feminist literary criticism.

- **Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986):** A French existentialist philosopher and writer, de Beauvoir is best known for her groundbreaking work “The Second Sex,” which explored the oppression of women and laid the groundwork for feminist literary theory.
- **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:** An Indian-American literary theorist and philosopher, Spivak is known for her work in postcolonialism and deconstruction. Her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is a key text in postcolonial and feminist studies.

## Postfeminist

- **Susan Faludi:** An American journalist and author, Faludi’s work often explores issues related to gender and feminism. Her book “Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women” critically examines the societal responses to feminism.
- **Camille Paglia:** An American cultural critic and author, Paglia is known for her provocative views on gender and sexuality. Her work, including “Sexual Personae,” challenges conventional feminist perspectives.
- **Rosalind Gill:** A British cultural and media studies scholar, Gill has written extensively on gender, media, and postfeminism. Her work explores the intersection of popular culture and

contemporary feminist thought.

- **Laura Kipnis:** An American cultural critic and essayist, Kipnis has written on topics related to gender, sexuality, and contemporary culture. Her book “Against Love: A Polemic” challenges conventional ideas about love and relationships.

## Queer Theory

- **Judith Butler:** A foundational figure in both feminist and queer theory, Judith Butler has made profound contributions to the understanding of gender and sexuality. Their work *Gender Trouble* has been influential in shaping queer theoretical discourse.
- **Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick:** An influential scholar in queer studies, Sedgwick’s works, such as *Epistemology of the Closet*, have contributed to the understanding of queer identities and the impact of societal norms on the construction of sexuality.
- **Michel Foucault:** Although not exclusively a queer theorist, Foucault’s ideas on power, knowledge, and sexuality laid the groundwork for many aspects of queer theory. His works, including *The History of Sexuality*, are foundational in queer studies.
- **Teresa de Lauretis:** An Italian-American scholar, de Lauretis has contributed significantly to feminist and queer theory. Her work *Queer*

*Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* explores the complexities of sexuality and identity.

- **Jack Halberstam:** A gender and queer studies scholar, Halberstam's works, including *Female Masculinity* and *In a Queer Time and Place*, engage with issues of gender nonconformity and the temporalities of queer experience.
- **Annamarie Jagose:** A New Zealand-born scholar, Jagose has written extensively on queer theory. Her book *Queer Theory: An Introduction* provides a comprehensive overview of key concepts within the field.
- **Leo Bersani:** An American literary theorist, Bersani's work often intersects with queer theory. His explorations of intimacy, desire, and the complexities of same-sex relationships have been influential in queer studies.

## Further Reading

- Aravind, Athulya. *Transformations of Sappho: Late 18th Century to 1900*. Senior Thesis written for Department of English, Northeastern University.  
<https://www.sfu.ca/~decaste/OISE/page2/files/deBeauvoirIntro.pdf> This is a wonderful example of a student-written feminist approach to English Romantic poetry.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg. "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and

Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation." *Feminist Theory* 21.1 (2020): 3-24.

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*Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003.

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Univ of California Press, 2008.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Spivak Reader: Selected works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Psychology Press, 1996.

## 44. Generative AI Model Essay

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

### Model AI Essay: Feminist Criticism

#### "Love's Rebellion: Defying Patriarchal Constraints in John Donne's 'The Canonization'"

In John Donne's poem "The Canonization," a profound exploration of love emerges, providing an



intriguing lens through which feminist criticism can be applied. The speaker's plea for autonomy and the freedom to love without societal interference resonates with feminist ideals, challenging patriarchal norms that may have restricted women's agency in 17th century England. The opening lines, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," confront the notion of patriarchal control over women's voices and choices. The speaker demands the right to express their love unhindered, resisting the imposition of external judgments or restrictions.

The poem engages with the complexities of love and its impact on individual identity, transcending traditional gender roles. The speaker challenges the conventional expectations placed on women in 17th century England, urging the audience to focus on the essence of love rather than conforming to societal norms. The lines "Call us what you will, we are made such by love" emphasize the transformative power of love, suggesting that the speaker and their beloved defy societal labels and expectations.

Examining the historical context, it's crucial to recognize the limited roles available to women in the 17th century, where societal norms and expectations were deeply rooted in patriarchal structures. The poem, however, disrupts these norms by presenting a narrative where love becomes a force that defies societal constraints, allowing for individual agency and self-determination.

Feminist critics may appreciate the poem's exploration of love as a unifying force that transcends gender boundaries. The speaker rejects the notion that

love can be confined to prescribed roles, challenging not only patriarchal control but also the rigid gender expectations that often marginalized women. By invoking the phoenix metaphor and proclaiming “we two being one, are it,” the poem advocates for a unity that goes beyond gender distinctions, suggesting a shared experience and equality in love.

In conclusion, John Donne’s “The Canonization” provides a rich ground for feminist analysis by challenging patriarchal norms and celebrating the transformative and unifying power of love. The poem invites readers to reconsider societal expectations placed on individuals, especially women, in the context of 17th century England, and encourages a more inclusive and egalitarian view of love.

I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice feminist criticism.

## Annotations: “Love’s Rebellion: Defying Patriarchal Constraints in John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

In John Donne’s poem “The Canonization,” a profound exploration of love emerges, providing an intriguing lens through which **feminist criticism** can be applied. The speaker’s plea for **autonomy** and the freedom to love without societal interference resonates with **feminist** ideals, **challenging patriarchal norms** that may have **restricted women’s agency** in 17th century England. The opening lines, “For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,” confront the notion of

**patriarchal control** over **women's voices and choices**. The speaker demands the right to express their love unhindered, resisting the imposition of external judgments or restrictions.

The poem engages with the complexities of love and its impact on **individual identity**, **transcending traditional gender roles**. The speaker challenges the **conventional expectations placed on women** in 17th century England, urging the audience to focus on the essence of love rather than **conforming to societal norms**. The lines "Call us what you will, we are made such by love" emphasize the transformative power of love, suggesting that the speaker and their beloved defy societal labels and expectations.

Examining the **historical context**, it's crucial to recognize the **limited roles available to women** in the 17th century, where societal norms and expectations were deeply **rooted in patriarchal structures**. The poem, however, **disrupts these norms** by presenting a narrative where love becomes a force that defies **societal constraints**, allowing for **individual agency and self-determination**.

**Feminist critics** may appreciate the poem's exploration of love as a unifying force that **transcends gender boundaries**. The speaker rejects the notion that love can be confined to **prescribed roles**, challenging not only **patriarchal control** but also the **rigid gender expectations** that often **marginalized women**. By invoking the phoenix metaphor and proclaiming "we two being one, are it," the poem advocates for a unity that goes beyond **gender distinctions**, suggesting a shared experience and equality in love.

In conclusion, John Donne's "The Canonization" provides a rich ground for **feminist analysis** by challenging **patriarchal norms** and celebrating the transformative and unifying power of love. The poem invites readers to reconsider **societal expectations** placed on individuals, especially **women**, in the **context** of 17th century England, and encourages a more **inclusive** and **egalitarian** view of love.

## Model AI Essay: Postfeminist Criticism

### “Beyond Dichotomies: Deconstructing Love and Gender in John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

John Donne’s “The Canonization” offers a rich canvas for postfeminist criticism, inviting an exploration of love that transcends traditional gender binaries. The poem’s intricate verses provide a platform for deconstructing societal expectations surrounding love and challenging established gender norms. The speaker’s plea for autonomy and the freedom to love disrupts conventional stereotypes, asserting individual agency in the realm of relationships. Within a postfeminist discourse, “The Canonization” becomes a political statement, resisting the rigid dichotomies that often characterize gender relations. The poet urges readers to engage critically with the representation of love, dismantling the binary notions of masculine and feminine roles within relationships.

The poem’s insistence on the freedom to love without external interference aligns with postfeminist principles, advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of romantic relationships.

Donne's verses become a discourse on love that rejects the limitations imposed by societal expectations and challenges the politics of gender roles prevalent in 17th-century England. By employing the metaphor of the phoenix, the poem further emphasizes the transformative power of love, suggesting a unity that transcends prescribed gender distinctions. The shared experiences of the speaker and their beloved become a representation of love that defies conventional norms, encouraging readers to view relationships beyond preconceived notions of gender.

In the context of postfeminist criticism, "The Canonization" prompts a reevaluation of love as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The poem's rejection of gender stereotypes and binary constructions invites readers to deconstruct societal expectations and engage in a more nuanced understanding of love. Donne's verses, within a postfeminist framework, become a call to move beyond traditional dichotomies, fostering a discourse that celebrates the individual agency and autonomy of those navigating the intricate landscape of romantic relationships.

I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice postfeminist criticism.

## Annotations: “Beyond Dichotomies: Deconstructing Love and Gender in John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

John Donne’s “The Canonization” offers a rich canvas for **postfeminist criticism**, inviting an exploration of love that **transcends traditional gender binaries**. The poem’s intricate verses provide a platform for **deconstructing societal expectations** surrounding love and **challenging established gender norms**. The speaker’s plea for **autonomy** and the freedom to love **disrupts conventional stereotypes**, asserting **individual agency** in the realm of relationships. Within a **postfeminist** discourse, “The Canonization” becomes a political statement, resisting the **rigid dichotomies** that often characterize **gender relations**. The poet urges readers to **engage critically** with the **representation** of love, **dismantling the binary notions of masculine and feminine roles** within relationships.

The poem’s insistence on the freedom to love without external interference aligns with **postfeminist principles**, advocating for a more **inclusive and egalitarian** understanding of romantic relationships. Donne’s verses become a **discourse** on love that rejects the **limitations imposed by societal expectations** and **challenges the politics of gender roles** prevalent in 17th-century England. By employing the metaphor of the phoenix, the poem further emphasizes the transformative power of love, suggesting a unity that **transcends prescribed gender distinctions**. The shared experiences of the speaker and **their** beloved become a representation of love that **defies conventional norms**, encouraging readers to view relationships beyond **preconceived notions of gender**.

In the context of **postfeminist criticism**, “The Canonization” prompts a **reevaluation** of love as a complex and multifaceted

phenomenon. The poem's **rejection of gender stereotypes and binary constructions** invites readers to **deconstruct societal expectations** and engage in a more nuanced understanding of love. Donne's verses, within a **postfeminist framework**, become a call to move beyond **traditional dichotomies**, fostering a **discourse** that celebrates the individual agency and autonomy of those navigating the intricate landscape of **romantic relationships**.

## Model AI Essay: Queer Theory

### "Queering Affections: Transgressing Heteronormativity in John Donne's 'The Canonization'"

John Donne's "The Canonization" unfolds as a poetic space ripe for a queer theory analysis, challenging the heteronormative constructs prevalent in the 17th century. The poem's exploration of love invites a queer reading that disrupts traditional binaries and transcends cisgender expectations. The speaker's plea for uninhibited love serves as a transgressive act, subverting societal norms and challenging the privileged position of heteronormativity. Within the discourse of queer theory, the poem becomes a site of resistance against the marginalization of non-

heteronormative identities, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of love and relationships.

Donne's verses navigate the social constructs of gender and sexuality, disrupting conventional expectations and inviting readers to view love through a queer lens. The rejection of societal judgments and the insistence on the autonomy to love without constraint align with queer theory's emphasis on challenging normative structures. The metaphor of the phoenix takes on a queer resonance, symbolizing the transformative power of love that goes beyond prescribed gender identities. The poem becomes an intersectional space, acknowledging the complex interplay of gender, sexuality, and societal expectations.

"The Canonization" invites readers to question the heteronormative assumptions prevalent in Donne's time and, by extension, contemporary society. Through a queer reading, the poem becomes a testament to the fluidity of love and the potential for liberation from cisgender expectations. Donne's exploration of shared experiences in love transcends the binary constructions of gender and challenges the privileged position of heteronormativity in the discourse on relationships. Ultimately, the poem, when viewed through the lens of queer theory, becomes a celebration of love's diverse expressions and a call for the queering of affections in the face of societal norms.

I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice queer theory.



## Annotations: “Queering Affections: Transgressing Heteronormativity in John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’”

John Donne’s “The Canonization” unfolds as a **poetic space** ripe for a **queer theory** analysis, challenging the **heteronormative constructs** prevalent in the 17th century. The poem’s exploration of love invites a **queer reading** that **disrupts traditional binaries** and **transcends cisgender** expectations. The speaker’s plea for uninhibited love serves as a **transgressive act**, **subverting societal norms** and **challenging the privileged position of heteronormativity**. Within the **discourse** of queer theory, the poem becomes a **site of resistance** against the **marginalization of non-heteronormative identities**, advocating for a more **inclusive understanding of love and relationships**. Okay, okay! We get it! ChatGPT knows how to throw in ALL the queer theory terms. Since you read some scholarship on this, you’re already familiar with some of this terminology and tis approach. I like the way the bot defines the poem as a “site of resistance.” I actually think this is an interesting thesis that can be supported with ample evidence from the text.

Donne’s verses navigate the **social constructs** of **gender and sexuality**, **disrupting conventional expectations** and inviting readers to view love through a **queer lens**. The rejection of **societal judgments** and the insistence on the **autonomy** to love without constraint align with **queer theory’s** emphasis on **challenging normative structures**. The metaphor of the phoenix takes on a **queer resonance**, symbolizing the **transformative** power of love that goes beyond prescribed gender identities. The poem becomes an **intersectional space**, acknowledging the complex **interplay of gender, sexuality, and societal expectations**. If I had been doing a queer theory analysis, I definitely would have looked at the image of the

phoenix. The poem also uses imagery more often associated with masculinity (eagles) and femininity (doves). The phoenix inhabits a nonbinary, non-gendered space in the poem between these two binaries. Expanding on this image and including the other traditionally gendered associations would add to this section of the analysis.

“The Canonization” invites readers to **question** the **heteronormative assumptions** prevalent in Donne’s time and, by extension, **contemporary society**. Through a **queer reading**, the poem becomes a testament to the **fluidity** of love and the **potential for liberation from cisgender expectations**. Donne’s exploration of shared experiences in love **transcends the binary constructions of gender** and **challenges the privileged position of heteronormativity in the discourse on relationships**. Ultimately, the poem, when viewed through the lens of **queer theory**, becomes a celebration of love’s **diverse** expressions and a call for the **queering of affections** in the face of **societal norms**.

# 45. Student Essay

## Example: Feminist Criticism

*The following student essay example of feminist criticism is taken from *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*. This is the publication created by students in English 211. This essay discusses Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains."*

### **Burning Stereotypes in Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains"**

*By Karley McCarthy*

Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains" takes place in the fallout of a nuclear war. The author chooses to tell the story through a technologically advanced house and its animatronic inhabitants instead of a traditional protagonist. The house goes about its day-to-day as if no war had struck. It functions as though its deceased family is still residing in its walls, taking care of the maintenance, happiness, and safety of itself and the long dead family. On the surface, Bradbury's story seems like a clear-cut warning about technology and humanity's permissiveness. Given that the short story was written in the 1940s, it's easy to analyze the themes present and how they related to women of the time. Bradbury's apt precautionary tale can be used as a metaphor for women's

expectations and role in society after World War II and how some women may have dealt with the fallout of their husbands coming back home with psychological trauma.

To experience “There Will Come Soft Rains” from a feminist perspective, readers must be aware of the societal norms that would have shaped Bradbury’s writing. “Soft Rains” takes place in the year 2026. Yet the house and norms found throughout were, “modeled after concept homes that showed society’s expectations of technological advancement” (Mambrol). This can be seen in the stereotypical nuclear family that once inhabited the house as well as their cliché white home and the hobbies present. According to writer Elaine Tyler May’s book *Homeward Bound*, America’s view of women’s role in society undertook a massive pendulum swing during the World War II era as the country transitioned through pre-war to post-war life. For example, in a matter of decades support for women joining the workforce shifted from 80% in opposition to only 13% (May 59). Despite this shift, the men coming back from the war still expected women to position themselves as the happy housewife they had left behind, not the newfound career woman archetype. Prominent figures of the 40s, such as actress Joan Crawford, portrayed a caricature of womanhood that is subservient to patriarchal gender roles, attempting to abandon the modern idea of a self-sufficient working-class woman (May 62-63). Keeping this in mind, how can this image of the 1940s woman be seen in Bradbury’s work?

Throughout Bradbury’s life he worked towards dismantling clichés in his own writing. A biography titled simply “Ray Bradbury” mentions that even in his earlier work, he was always attempting to “escape the constrictions of stereotypes” found in early science fiction (Seed 13). An example of him breaking constrictions could be his use of a nonhuman protagonist. Instead, Bradbury relies on the personification of the house and its robotic counterparts. Bradbury describes the house as having “electric eyes” and emotions such as a, “preoccupation

with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia," something that would make the house quiver at the sounds of the outside world (2-3). While these descriptions are interesting, Bradbury's use of personification here is a thought-provoking choice when one breaks down what exactly the house is meant to personify.

One analysis of this story notes that the house's personification, "replaces the most human aspects of life," for its inhabitants (Mambrol). Throughout the story, the house acts as a caretaker, records a schedule, cooks, cleans, and even attempts to extinguish an all-consuming fire. While firefighting is not a traditionally feminine career or expectation from the 1940s (more on that later), most of the house's daily tasks are replacing jobs that were traditionally held by a household's matriarch. Expanding further on this dichotomy of male/woman tasks, a chore mentioned in the story that is 'traditionally' accepted as a masculine household duty—mowing the lawn—is still assigned as a male task. This feels intentional to the house's design as Bradbury is, "a social critic, and his work is pertinent to *real* problems on earth" (Dominianni 49). Bradbury's story is not meant to commentate on just an apocalypse, but society at large. Bradbury describes the west face of the house as, "black, save for five places" (Bradbury 1-2). These "five places" are the silhouettes of the family who had been incinerated by a nuclear bomb. The family's two children are included playing with a ball, but the mother and father's descriptions are most important. The mother is seen in a passive role, picking flowers, while the father mows the lawn. The subtext here is that the man is not replaceable in his mundane and tedious task. Only the woman is replaced. While this is a small flash into the owners' lives, what "human aspect" or autonomy of the father's life has been replaced by the house's actions if the house is mainly personifying only the traditional 1940s female-held positions?

The message here is that a man's position in society is irreplaceable while a woman's is one of mere support.

While this dynamic of husband vs subordinate is harmful, wives supporting their partners is nothing new. *Homeward Bound* explains that life after World War II for many women meant a return to their previous position as a housewife while many men came home irreparably damaged by years of warfare. PTSD, known then as shellshock, affected countless men returning from the war. Women were often expected to mend the psychological damage as part of their domestic responsibilities, even if they were unprepared for the realities of the severe trauma their husbands had faced (May 64-65). The psychological effects of the war came crashing into women's lives the same way that the tree fell into the autonomous house in "Soft Rains". As mentioned earlier, firefighting is not a task someone from the 40s would expect of women, but the house's combustion and its scramble to save itself can be seen as a metaphor for women attempting to reverse the cold reality that the war had left them with. The picturesque family they had dreamed of would forever be scarred by the casualties that took place overseas. While Bradbury may not have meant for women to be invoked specifically from this precautionary tale, it's obvious that him wanting his science fiction to act as, "a cumulative early warning system against unforeseen consequences," would have impacted women of the time as much as men (Seed 22). The unforeseen consequences here is the trauma the war inflicted on families.

While men were fighting on the front lines, women back home and in noncombat positions would still feel the war's ripples. In "Soft Rains" the nuclear tragedy had left, "a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles" (Bradbury 1). Despite the destruction, the house continues its routine as though nothing had happened. This can be seen as a metaphor for how women responded to the trauma their husbands brought back from the war. Women were urged to,

“preserve for him the essence of the girl he fell in love with, the girl he longs to come back to. . .The least we can do as women is to try to live up to some of those expectations” (May 64). Following this, many could have put their desires and personal growth to the side to act as a secondary character in their husband’s lives.

The final line can be read as the culmination of similarities between post-war women and Bradbury’s house. The violence and destruction that fell upon the house in its final moments leaves little standing. What’s remarkable is how the house still attempts to continue despite its destruction. The final lines of the short story exemplify this: “Within the wall, a last voice said, over and over again and again, even as the sun rose to shine upon the heaped rubble and steam: ‘Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is...’” (Bradbury 5). The house is acting just like the women from the 40s, clinging to their past in an attempt to preserve something that had already been lost, society’s innocence. One analysis points out that, “The house is depicted in this way because it represents both humanity and humanity’s failure to save itself” (Mambrol). While it might be wrong to say that women were unable to save themselves in this situation, this quote does touch on an idea present in the feminist metaphor for “Soft Rains”. The preservation of “the essence of the girl he fell in love with, the girl he longs to come back to” was a failure (May 64). The same way that the house cannot preserve itself from destruction, women cannot preserve an image of themselves that had already dissolved. As mentioned earlier, women had already entered the workforce, a huge step towards removing sexist stereotypes around women’s worth. After garnering work-based independence, it seems impossible that the idea of women solely as men’s support would not immolate.

While Bradbury’s “Soft Rains” can be viewed as an apt precautionary tale with real modern world issues at hand, in many ways it is a period piece. As a writer in the 1940s, it’s

hard to imagine that Bradbury's story would not have been influenced by the framework of a nuclear family and the stereotypical expectations of this time. Bradbury's use of personification opens dialogue about gender roles in the 1940s and how war had complicated patriarchal expectations. Despite his attempt to bypass science fiction stereotypes, his story is full of metaphor for gender stereotypes. Using a feminist lens to analyze the story allows it to be read as a metaphor for war and its effects on married women. The standard analysis appears to say that, "machine no longer served humanity in "There Will Come Soft Rains"; there humanity is subservient to machinery" (Dominianni 49). From a feminist perspective, instead of machine, the house represents patriarchy and gender norms. While men suffered greatly during World War II, women often put their wants and futures on hold to support their husbands. This is a selfless act that shows the resilience of women despite their society's wish to downplay their potential and turn them into mere support.

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## 46. Practicing Gender Criticism

Now that you've learned about feminist, postfeminist and queer theory, practiced these methods of analysis with "January, 1795" and "The Eyepatch," and reviewed some examples, you will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using one of these three gender criticisms as your approach. You will read three different texts below. Choose one text and respond to the questions in a short essay (500-750 words).

I have included questions to guide your reading. You may choose to respond to some or all of these questions; however, your response should be written as a short essay, and you will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text. Post your short essay as a response to the Gender Criticism Theoretical Response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

### Checklist for Practicing Feminist, Postfeminist, and Queer Theory Criticism

All three approaches are concerned with representations of gender and sexuality in texts. Here's

a checklist that may help you. You do not need to address every item on this list.

1. **Choose a Theoretical Approach:** Identify whether you will use feminist, postfeminist, or queer theory in your analysis.
2. **Character Analysis:** Examine the characters/ speakers in the text, looking for stereotypes based on sex or gender and considering how these stereotypes interact with the discourse of the time when the texts were written. For postfeminist and queer theory, also consider binary oppositions and privileged meanings.
3. **Author's Background:** Think about how the author's sex or gender identity has influenced the work. Because these three critical approaches are intersectional, you may also want to consider race, socioeconomic status, or other identities.
4. **Symbolism and Imagery:** Analyze symbols and imagery, exploring how they may represent gender or sexuality and reinforce or undercut stereotypes (e.g., phoenix, eagles, and doves in "The Canonization").
5. **Themes and Motifs:** Identify recurring themes and motifs in the text. Explore how these elements reflect the experiences of women or queer people.

# 1. Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day? by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
    Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
    But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
    So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

*"Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" by William Shakespeare is in the public domain.*

## Questions

1. What is the gender and sexuality of the speaker? What is gender and sexuality of the person being addressed in the poem? Can you find evidence to support your answer in the text itself?
2. What cultural assumptions or constructions did you bring to your answer to question one? How does considering alternative possibilities open up our reading of the poem?
3. If the beloved is a woman, what stereotypes does the poem's symbolism reinforce about aging and beauty?
4. What does the speaker value in a romantic partner? How

do these values compare with your contemporary values?

## 2. Excerpt from *Middlemarch* by George Eliot

Dorothea's native strength of will was no longer all converted into resolute submission. She had a great yearning to be at Lowick, and was simply determined to go, not feeling bound to tell all her reasons. But every one around her disapproved. Sir James was much pained, and offered that they should all migrate to Cheltenham for a few months with the sacred ark, otherwise called a cradle: at that period a man could hardly know what to propose if Cheltenham were rejected.

The Dowager Lady Chettam, just returned from a visit to her daughter in town, wished, at least, that Mrs. Vigo should be written to, and invited to accept the office of companion to Mrs. Casaubon: it was not credible that Dorothea as a young widow would think of living alone in the house at Lowick. Mrs. Vigo had been reader and secretary to royal personages, and in point of knowledge and sentiments even Dorothea could have nothing to object to her.

Mrs. Cadwallader said, privately, "You will certainly go mad in that house alone, my dear. You will see visions. We have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane, and call things by the same names as other people call them by. To be sure, for younger sons and women who have no money, it is a sort of provision to go mad: they are taken care of then. But you must not run into that. I dare say you are a little bored here with our good dowager; but think what a bore you might become

yourself to your fellow-creatures if you were always playing tragedy queen and taking things sublimely. Sitting alone in that library at Lowick you may fancy yourself ruling the weather; you must get a few people round you who wouldn't believe you if you told them. That is a good lowering medicine."

"I never called everything by the same name that all the people about me did," said Dorothea, stoutly.

"But I suppose you have found out your mistake, my dear," said Mrs. Cadwallader, "and that is a proof of sanity."

Dorothea was aware of the sting, but it did not hurt her. "No," she said, "I still think that the greater part of the world is mistaken about many things. Surely one may be sane and yet think so, since the greater part of the world has often had to come round from its opinion."

Mrs. Cadwallader said no more on that point to Dorothea, but to her husband she remarked, "It will be well for her to marry again as soon as it is proper, if one could get her among the right people. Of course the Chettams would not wish it. But I see clearly a husband is the best thing to keep her in order. If we were not so poor I would invite Lord Triton. He will be marquis some day, and there is no denying that she would make a good marchioness: she looks handsomer than ever in her mourning."

"My dear Elinor, do let the poor woman alone. Such contrivances are of no use," said the easy Rector.

"No use? How are matches made, except by bringing men and women together? And it is a shame that her uncle should have run away and shut up the Grange just now. There ought to be plenty of eligible matches invited to Freshitt and the Grange. Lord Triton is precisely the man: full of plans for making the people

happy in a soft-headed sort of way. That would just suit Mrs. Casaubon."

"Let Mrs. Casaubon choose for herself, Elinor."

"That is the nonsense you wise men talk! How can she choose if she has no variety to choose from? A woman's choice usually means taking the only man she can get. Mark my words, Humphrey. If her friends don't exert themselves, there will be a worse business than the Casaubon business yet."

"For heaven's sake don't touch on that topic, Elinor! It is a very sore point with Sir James. He would be deeply offended if you entered on it to him unnecessarily."

"I have never entered on it," said Mrs Cadwallader, opening her hands. "Celia told me all about the will at the beginning, without any asking of mine."

"Yes, yes; but they want the thing hushed up, and I understand that the young fellow is going out of the neighborhood."

Mrs. Cadwallader said nothing, but gave her husband three significant nods, with a very sarcastic expression in her dark eyes.

Dorothea quietly persisted in spite of remonstrance and persuasion. So by the end of June the shutters were all opened at Lowick Manor, and the morning gazed calmly into the library, shining on the rows of note-books as it shines on the weary waste planted with huge stones, the mute memorial of a forgotten faith; and the evening laden with roses entered silently into the blue-green boudoir where Dorothea chose oftenest to sit. At first she walked into every room, questioning the eighteen months of her married life, and carrying on her thoughts as if they were a speech to be heard by her husband. Then, she lingered in the library and could not be at rest till she had carefully ranged all the note-books as she imagined that he would wish to see them,

in orderly sequence. The pity which had been the restraining compelling motive in her life with him still clung about his image, even while she remonstrated with him in indignant thought and told him that he was unjust. One little act of hers may perhaps be smiled at as superstitious. The Synoptical Tabulation for the use of Mrs. Casaubon, she carefully enclosed and sealed, writing within the envelope, "I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in—Dorothea?" Then she deposited the paper in her own desk.

That silent colloquy was perhaps only the more earnest because underneath and through it all there was always the deep longing which had really determined her to come to Lowick. The longing was to see Will Ladislaw. She did not know any good that could come of their meeting: she was helpless; her hands had been tied from making up to him for any unfairness in his lot. But her soul thirsted to see him. How could it be otherwise? If a princess in the days of enchantment had seen a four-footed creature from among those which live in herds come to her once and again with a human gaze which rested upon her with choice and beseeching, what would she think of in her journeying, what would she look for when the herds passed her? Surely for the gaze which had found her, and which she would know again. Life would be no better than candle-light tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy. It was true that Dorothea wanted to know the Farebrothers better, and especially to talk to the new rector, but also true that remembering what Lydgate had told her about Will Ladislaw and little Miss Noble, she counted on Will's coming to Lowick to see



the Farebrother family. The very first Sunday, *before* she entered the church, she saw him as she had seen him the last time she was there, alone in the clergyman's pew; but *when* she entered his figure was gone.

*Excerpt from Middlemarch by George Eliot is in the public domain.*

## Questions

You may need to do a little research to answer these questions.

1. George Eliot is the pseudonym used by the English author Mary Anne Evans. Why do you think she wrote under a male pseudonym? Does knowing that the author is actually a woman change how you read or interpret the text?
2. The dedication page to *Middlemarch* reads "To my dear Husband, George Henry Lewes, in this nineteenth year of our blessed union." What does this dedication reveal about gender and sexuality in 19th century Victorian England? How does this text complement that information?
3. What gender stereotypes do you see in the text? How are these gender stereotypes subverted?
4. How does the role of gender and sexuality in this text compare with Mary Robinson's poem "January, 1795"?

## 3. Insomnia and the Seven Steps to Grace

BY JOY HARJO

At dawn the panther of the heavens peers over the edge

of the world.

She hears the stars gossip with the sun, sees the moon  
washing her lean

darkness with water electrified by prayers. All over the  
world there are those

who can't sleep, those who never awaken.

My granddaughter sleeps on the breast of her mother  
with milk on

her mouth. A fly contemplates the sweetness of lactose.

Her father is wrapped in the blanket of nightmares. For  
safety he

approaches the red hills near Thoreau. They recognize  
him and sing for

him.

Her mother has business in the house of chaos. She is a  
prophet dis-

guised as a young mother who is looking for a job. She  
appears at the

door of my dreams and we put the house back together.

Panther watches as human and animal souls are lifted  
to the heavens by

rain clouds to partake of songs of beautiful thunder.

Others are led by deer and antelope in the wistful hours  
to the vil-

lages of their ancestors. There they eat cornmeal cooked  
with berries

that stain their lips with purple while the tree of life  
flickers in the sun.

It's October, though the season before dawn is always  
winter. On the

city streets of this desert town lit by chemical yellow  
travelers

search for home.

Some have been drinking and intimate with strangers.

Others are

escapees from the night shift, sip lukewarm coffee, shift  
gears to the  
other side of darkness.

One woman stops at a red light, turns over a worn tape  
to the last  
chorus of a whispery blues. She has decided to live  
another day.

The stars take notice, as do the half-asleep flowers,  
prickly pear and  
chinaberry tree who drink exhaust into their roots, into  
the earth.

She guns the light to home where her children are  
asleep and may  
never know she ever left. That their fate took a turn in  
the land of  
nightmares toward the sun may be untouchable  
knowledge.

It is a sweet sound.

The panther relative yawns and puts her head between  
her paws.

She dreams of the house of panthers and the seven  
steps to grace.

*"Insomnia and the Seven Steps to Grace" from The Woman  
Who Fell from the Sky: Poems by Joy Harjo is All Rights  
Reserved. Copyright © 1996 by Joy Harjo. Used with Fair Use  
Exception.*

## Questions

1. What are the roles of mothers and fathers in the poem?  
How do these roles conform to or disrupt stereotypes?
2. The author of this poem, former U.S. Poet Laureate Joy  
Harjo, is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. What

intersections among gender and culture do you see in this poem?

3. The panther is a powerful mythological creature in Cree mythology. In this poem, what is the panther's gender? Why is this significant to our understanding of the poem?

## Theoretical Response Assignment Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.

### Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called "Practicing [Theoretical Approach]." (For example, "Practicing New Criticism") Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.

**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you've chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of

each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn a high grade. These responses are about practicing an*

*approach, not mastering it.*

# 47. Gender Criticism

## Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=573#oembed-1>*

### Slide One: Gender Criticisms

Welcome! I'm Dr. Liza Long. In this presentation for English 211, we will learn more about feminist, postfeminist, and Queer Theory approaches to texts. The target for all three approaches in this section is gender, but these three critical approaches are very different. They can also all be considered as political critiques of power structures, similar to the Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies lenses we covered in a previous section of the course.

We will be considering how biological sex, gender, and heteronormative social constructs have contributed to how we define literature. I want you to consider that the very act of reading scholarship by women and queer scholars is considered a feminist act.

We will be considering three approaches to gender and literature in the chronological order that they developed,

starting with feminist criticism. With feminist literary analysis, we start by considering the woman both as a writer and the woman as she is written (the Latin poets' *scripta puella* or "written girl" was an area of research I focused on). You may be familiar with labels like "first wave," "second wave," and "third wave" when we talk about feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism came to prominence as an approach to literary texts in the 1970s along with New Historicism. You'll remember that with New Historicism, we learned there are no stable facts in history. Similarly, with feminist criticism, we consider which voices are heard and which are silenced, but we consider those questions with respect to women and girls, looking at text and context for women throughout history. We also consider the status of women and the relationships of women and men. One word you'll hear in this type of criticism is "patriarchy." This seems to be an important part of our current discourse, especially because of the popularity of Greta Gerwig's Barbie movie (and I could probably do a whole lecture just about that movie).

With both postfeminist and queer theory criticism, you may also see the term "patriarchy," since these two lenses build on feminist critical approaches. Postfeminist criticism is a deconstruction of feminism. There's an emphasis in postfeminist criticism on contemporary culture, which may overlap with a cultural studies approach. The "post" in postfeminism is similar to the "post" in postcolonialism, which is a deconstructive approach to texts produced and consumed after colonization. While postfeminist critics argue that a feminist approach is too simplistic, and while they also assume that some of the aims of feminism have been achieved, this type of criticism does not necessarily preclude talking about feminist issues and power imbalances based on gender. You can still use techniques from feminist criticism within postfeminist criticism.

Finally, Queer Theory examines and critiques the dominance



of heteronormative culture. The goal is to undermine the dominant culture's understanding of binary gender (men/women) and sexuality (gay/straight). This is a particularly interesting area of inquiry for literary texts and involves some new ways of interpreting and understanding things such as place and time in literature. I think the three examples of scholarship in this section do a good job of demonstrating the differences among these three approaches.

As I noted, both postfeminist and Queer Theory come after feminism and are deconstructive approaches to gender in a literary text. Feminist criticism is not considered a deconstructive approach, though it does share some of the principles of New Historicism in considering that our understanding of women, both as writers and characters, is dependent on the dominant culture.

## **Slide Two: Why and How?**

Let's learn more about why we might choose these critical approaches and how we can use them to analyze literary texts. For this slide, I chose a picture of Hermione Granger. Whatever you think of J.K. Rowling as an author right now (and that's a whole separate conversation), I like Hermione as a strong female character. Hermione is a written woman, and she is also a character who is written by a woman author, J.K. Rowling. In feminist, postfeminist, and Queer Theory approaches, we can consider both the author's gender and the characters in our analysis. We can consider Hermione Granger as a written woman, and we can consider J.K. Rowling as the woman who wrote her. This isn't like New Criticism—we are not doing death of the author in this approach. The author's identity matters in this type of criticism. As another example that we'll see in Camille Paglia's postfeminist scholarship, we can consider

Emily Dickinson as a writer as well as the way gender is treated in Emily Dickinson's poetry

One thing I want to stress is that there's not really right or a wrong way to do feminist, postfeminist or Queer Theory criticism. Any approach that considers gender works as long as you can support it with evidence from the text. I mean, I personally think that Camille Paglia's approach to Emily Dickinson as a sadomasochist is a little bit out there, but she supports her argument with evidence from the text, and it certainly helps me to consider the text and its meaning differently. If you can support your own argument with evidence from the text, you're doing it right.

With feminist criticism, you'll focus both on how women have written and how women have been written. With postfeminism and Queer Theory, you will be focusing more on gender stereotypes and looking how they operate in the text, and for Queer Theory, especially, you will be deconstructing the idea of the binary with respect to both sexuality (gay/straight) and gender (male/female).

I'm sure you're all aware of the contemporary discourse about gender, where politicians are trying to define and limit gender to the binary. Queer Theory would say, "Excuse me? Let me show you all the ways there aren't just two genders, that gender is a cultural construct whose identifiers shift over time." Queer Theory interrogates gender stereotypes: where they might come from; how they operate in the text; how they might reinforce or subvert heteronormative cultural structures. We will go over the terminology in more detail later in the presentation, but just keep in mind that some of the terms we learned in New Historicism/Cultural Studies and in postcolonial and ethnic studies criticism are often used in feminist, postfeminist, and Queer Theory analysis.

One goal of this type of criticism is to break down our preconceptions and prejudices about sex and gender. That's why I just love that Shakespeare text you'll work with in the

“Practicing” chapter of this section. Why do we assume that the gender of the speaker in this poem is male and the person who is addressed is female? Is there anything in the actual text of the poem to support these assumptions? These approaches can open even familiar texts to different possible interpretations.

As the Shakespeare example shows, you can use any of these three methods on any text from any period. You’re not limited in asking these types of questions by when something was written. The model text I have used for feminist criticism was written by Mary Robinson in 1795.

However, I did choose a contemporary text by a queer author for your queer theory example, a short story called “The Eyepatch.” As an aside, this author happens to be my amazing daughter, and she’s letting me republish her story, which was originally published in “The Talking River Review,” [here](#). The protagonist of the story is a non-binary person, and I think it’s interesting to consider what this choice means in terms of craft and impact. Also, just like we might consider women as writers with feminist approaches, we want to consider queer authors when that information is available to us. I wanted to make sure you had an example of literature written by a queer author.

## **Slide Three: Scholarship**

I chose three very different excerpts of scholarship for this section, and I think all three do a good job of introducing you to the terminology and critical approaches. For feminist criticism, I started with Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational text to feminist criticism, *The Second Sex*. You’ll read a brief excerpt from this book (and in all your spare time, I recommend the entire book if you haven’t encountered it in another course). This quote is well known: “One is not born but becomes a woman.” Let’s pause for a moment and think about what de

Beauvoir means. The idea behind this is that the concept of woman is a cultural and social construct. In other words, our idea of woman is human (and perhaps largely man)-made.

Does that idea resonate with you? If you've never thought about this before, then thinking about it now is a feminist act. If you identify as a woman, how do you know that you are a woman? If you do not identify as a woman, how do you know that you are not a woman? Try to consider the question outside the obvious response of "biological sex characteristics." Other than these differences, what is a woman? De Beauvoir asks us to consider this question from a perspective of dominant and dominated cultures.

Our postfeminist example comes from Camille Paglia, an absolutely unapologetic combatant in the culture wars of the past 30 plus years. I mean, Emily Dickinson as a sadomasochist—that's definitely a postfeminist reading! But as I noted, Paglia can support that reading with evidence from the text. It's a good example of postfeminist criticism, and Paglia is considered along with Susan Faludi and a few others to be a prominent post-feminist critic. She's still active in her scholarship. You may read about her in *The New York Times*, for example. I also like Paglia as an example because of her connection to the culture wars. As I mentioned previously, postfeminism overlaps with cultural studies in many ways and is particularly concerned with pop culture.

Camille Paglia's 1990 book *Sexual Personae* was based on a dissertation she finished in 1974. The dissertation was definitely before its time. She finally published the book in 1990, and it's considered foundational to postfeminist critical theory. I chose the Emily Dickinson chapter from this book because I do think the central premise is in-your-face and outrageous. These types of readings are common in postfeminist criticism. Paglia is basically saying, "What if instead of thinking of Emily Dickinson in a traditional feminist sense as a victim who was oppressed by the men in her life, instead we see Dickinson as

an empowered person using the male gaze to her advantage? Paglia writes, ““It is a sentimental error to think Emily Dickinson the victim of male obstructionism.” That’s a classic postfeminist approach, one that deconstructs a more traditional feminist reading of the situation and the text.

Finally, we have an excerpt from Judith Butler, who is associated strongly with both feminist criticism and queer theory. Butler started out as a prominent feminist critic working within that lens and then evolved toward queer theory. Their 2011 book *Bodies that Matter* is what I chose to excerpt here, but *Gender Matters* from the 1990s is considered by many to be a foundational text for Queer Theory

If you have a hard time reading Butler, you’re not alone. Their ideas are really tough (similar to Foucault and Derrida in difficulty). We’ll talk about that when we look at limitations for queer theory criticism. Butler’s work can be technical and relies heavily on philosophers like Derrida and the ideas of deconstruction. The jargon can feel hard, but their ideas, when we unpack them, are intriguing. Judith Butler is saying the same thing here that Simone de Beauvoir said about being a woman. Butler is saying that sex is a cultural norm. Obviously, we have bodies, but what that means to us is not static; it’s not intrinsic or internal. It’s a norm that our culture imposes on us. Our culture needs to put us in boxes to make us intelligible to each other. This is a challenge we’re working with in our society right now.

## **Slide Four: Feminist Criticism**

So how do we do these types of criticism? Keep in mind you don’t have to do all these things when you’re doing feminist criticism. You could just focus on any one of the things on this list. But these are some different approaches that you might take with feminist criticism. You could look at how gender roles

and stereotypes are shaping identities in a text by examining the characters. For example, thinking back to Katherine Mansfield's story "A Cup of Tea" that we read as an example of Marxist criticism, if we were doing feminist criticism, we could look at the characters of the wife and the husband, how they are depicted and how gender stereotypes play into their interactions. Why does the wife need her husband to think she is pretty? Why does she care so much about this, and how does she use her femininity to achieve her goals?

When you're doing this type of criticism, you'll want to think about who has the power to act (sometimes called agency). Do all the characters have autonomy? This is also a question to consider when you read the passage by George Eliot (the pen name for Maryanne Evans) from *Middlemarch*. This novel is considered to be one of the best English novels ever written. How are male and female characters represented? How did their interactions either contribute to or challenge traditional gender norms?

If you're doing theme exploration, keep gender in the center of your target. You might look at sexism, women's rights, or how femininity and masculinity are constructed. You could also consider how societal attitudes are reflected in the text.

For language and symbolism, think about the model AI essay for this section. ChatGPT focused on the eagle as a masculine image and the dove as a feminine image, and the phoenix can be our neutral or non-binary image. That would be a really interesting approach to take to "The Canonization." Those are three examples of how a symbol in a text might be associated with gender.

Authorial intent and context both can matter in this type of criticism. For example, we could investigate Mary Robinson as a writer. We would know more about who she was and what her relationship to other English Romantic poets was. We would consider how she operated in that society to help us interpret her poem.

Finally, intersectionality is often tied to feminist criticism. This concept has become increasingly important in literary analysis, and it means that we don't just consider gender when we look at a character's or an author's identity. We could also consider social class, race, etc. This would mean our critical analysis included an intersection of different theories such as feminist, Marxist, and ethnic studies criticism. We're not just stuck with people as women or men in the text; we can look at their other identities as well.

## **Slide Five: Postfeminist Criticism**

Next we have postfeminist criticism. Look how different this list is from feminist criticism. One thing I immediately notice is the jargon. A trope in this sense is just a convention or a standard we often see associated with this type of criticism. With postfeminism, there's a very strong focus on individual empowerment or what we sometimes call choice feminism. This is the idea that as a woman, I get to decide what feminism looks like. We see this in defense of the tradwife culture right now. Nobody else can tell me what feminism is.

Choice feminism resonates with me personally. I was a stay-at-home mom for a long time. Was I still a feminist if I was staying home and raising my kids? Choice feminists say, yes! But some traditional feminists might say no. I was "betraying the cause," by taking on a traditional subordinate gender role.

Postfeminism argues that many of the goals feminism set were achieved, and that women now have more individual empowerment, more control over what feminism means to them individually. Another postfeminist idea is that traditional gender roles aren't necessarily relevant anymore. So you can look at how the narrative either reinforces or subverts feminist goals or traditional gender roles.

You don't have to do everything on this slide to do

postfeminist criticism. These are different approaches you might take. You can look at ambiguities and contradictions because this is a deconstructive stance toward a text. Looking at ambiguities in the text where things about gender and sexuality aren't clear could also be a post-feminist approach. Consider the complexities of gender dynamics and look for places where we see conflicts or different perspectives on agency for the character. Under what circumstances are they allowed to act?

As I said earlier, there's definitely a cultural studies slant for post-feminist criticism. Pop culture and media studies are both connected to these ideas. Have you heard of Madonna Studies or Taylor Swift Studies programs? These are real academic courses and programs, and they represent a postfeminist approach to these pop culture icons. Madonna is a post-feminist icon in some ways. She's all about choice feminism. She's just going to be whoever she wants to be. No one's going to tell her who she is. If you're thinking, what does postfeminism look like, Madonna is a great choice (and I think Beyonce is her successor). I think of her because she's reinvented herself multiple times. She's whatever she wants to be.

Global and cultural perspectives can definitely be brought in to postfeminist criticism. Remember, this can be kind of an intersectional approach,

For temporal considerations, it would be appropriate to think about the historical context with this type of criticism, but it's less important than it is with feminist criticism. With feminist criticism we are more concerned with the historical context than we are with postfeminism. But with temporal considerations, we might consider how a text is received differently over time. Think back to New Historicism and how we considered the scholarly reception of Langston Hughes's work. Critical reception changed over time. I am actually



curious about that with Mary Robinson. I want to know more about when people started reading her work.

## Slide Six: Queer Theory

Finally, let's look at Queer Theory. This is also a deconstructive approach to texts with a focus on the binaries of gender and sexuality. You'll see the word "heteronormative" used frequently with this type of lens. Just like the word "patriarchy" is a clue that you're dealing with feminism, "heteronormative" signals a Queer Theory approach to a text. Binary is another common term in Queer Theory. "Deconstructing the binary" is a common Queer Theory phrase.

You'll definitely be looking for queer identities in the text and perhaps in the author's life. Think about how characters navigate and express gender identity and also their sexuality.

You can also think about the author as queer. We see a lot of interest right now about the identities of both Emily Dickinson and Louisa May Alcott, who asked her friends to call her Lou. In both of their cases, this is speculative, but many authors today have confirmed their queer identities. It's important to consider how queer authors write and are received.

The idea of language and subversion is similar to what we learned about in postcolonial and cultural studies. How does the text subvert cultural expectations or norms?

Queer time and space is an area of particular interest to scholars right now. If I were using a Queer Theory lens to examine Adrienne Kennedy's play, I might consider how the play's nonlinear structure and double set subverts our expectations for drama. We are seeing lots of scholarship right now on the idea of space and place, how time and space are represented in the text with the idea that nonlinear or non-normative structure is often associated with this particular theory. If you read a text that's nonlinear or that doesn't have

a traditional plot arc, Queer Theory might be a good approach for analyzing that text. How does the text disrupt our conventional/cultural ideas about place and space? If you're questioning the gender binary, it opens up opportunities to question everything. This approach opens up the text to a variety of readings.

I've mentioned throughout the course that critical theory and literature develop in conversation, and I think we are definitely seeing that in current literary fiction. Many of the books I have read in the past few years use nonlinear structures. I think that queer theory is influencing the way authors frame texts.

Finally, intersectionality is also important for queer theory. You'll also know you're reading queer theory because your head will hurt. It's difficult stuff. I personally have been playing around with Microsoft Copilot to help explain the more difficult concepts in the reading. These generative AI tools can be useful for breaking things down.

## **Slide Seven: January, 1795**

In class, we read "January, 1795" together and also looked at the poem "London" from one of Mary Robinson's slightly more famous contemporaries, William Blake. We decided that Mary's poem was better. So why don't we read Mary Robinson today? We all know who William Blake is. But I had to do a Google search for "British women poets in the 1800s" to encounter Mary Robinson. Why was she excluded from the canon? Is it because Blake is a better poet? Or are there other things to consider?

Reading this poem is a feminist act. Mary Robinson was a really good poet. She has a mastery of form and meter, and her poem is full of irony and wit. Think back to the beginning of the course, when I asked you what literature was. My goal is

that you will finish this course feeling empowered to decide for yourself. Feminist, postfeminist, and queer theory approaches all work to blow up the Western canon. Because of these critical approaches, we have seen the so-called canon—the works “defined” as literature—open up to new and interesting voices. At the same time, we have to remember that this doesn’t mean that works by Western white men do not have value. These books are great too! We’re just noticing that these great authors have contemporaries who are equally or even more skilled, but who are not studied as much as their white male counterparts. If we had a friendly competition to see who could write the best poem about London in the late 1700s, I think Mary Robinson wins. But Blake’s poem made it into the canon, while hers did not.

This is one important feminist theory approach to the text. We ask questions about the canon and the social constructs that led to certain authors being excluded and certain other authors being excluded.

We also consider what an 18th century woman writer might look like. We are feminists when we read her work. But was Mary a feminist? What were her own beliefs about the nature of women? Fortunately, we have so many of her poems that we can start to construct some ideas about what she thought about women’s roles based on what she wrote. This is what an 18th century feminist looks like, painted by Joshua Reynolds, a famous portrait painter from this time. How does changing our reading of the poem from “written woman” to “woman as writer” change our understanding of the poem?

When we look at “January, 1795,” we might ask this question about this line: “wives who laugh at passive spouses.” What does this line tell us about who is really in charge? Who has autonomy? Based on Robinson’s poem, English women in 1795 seem to have some autonomy and agency. What evidence do we see for this in the text?

## Slide Eight: Terms to Use

I've already been using a lot of the terms on this slide, and we have also encountered them in previous sections, but let's go over them briefly again.

Canon refers to "serious" works of literature. I sometimes ask students why there are no Roman women authors. The answer is usually something along the lines of, "Oh, they just didn't want to write. They were at home with the children (etc.)." But we know this isn't true because their male contemporaries wrote about them. There are no Roman women authors today because even though they were popular and acknowledged during their lifetimes, their works did not survive from antiquity. Feminist theory asked a simple question: "Why aren't women in the canon?" And it refuses this simple and incorrect answer. Women aren't in the canon because they were excluded from the canon. Of course, this raises a whole new set of questions.

The constructed self is the self that we create. This is an important concept for post-feminist and Queer Theory criticism. This is a collection of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that a person has created about themselves within the cultural influences they exist under. What types of things influence your constructed self? How do you know who you are?

America Ferrara's iconic monologue in the Barbie movie is a fantastic example of a feminist approach to the constructed self because she exposes how the culture makes it impossible for women to be all the constructed selves that she lists and society still expects women to be all these things. When we think about feminist approaches to texts, we have to ask the hard question: where does this constructed self for women come from?

Exclusion is the idea that's tied to the constructed self, that what we see in literature depends on two things: The cultural

values that we bring to the text, but also the cultural values of the time that was written. We will inevitably read a text differently than the text that was written.

Gender is complicated. It's the male/female constructed identity, while sex is biological. Gender does not necessarily match sex assigned at birth. In feminist criticism, the idea of the binary is important. Feminist criticism is looking at women and men and the stereotypes based on women and men. Post-feminist and queer theory are deconstructing the idea that this binary even exists. They're saying, well, there's no such thing as women or men. Gender is a constructed identity.

That's not true in feminism. Feminism to some extent thinks women are constructed, but there's no subversion of the connection between gender identity and sex assigned at birth. Basically, women are women and men are men in feminist criticism. Keep in mind that no one in any of these theories is saying that biological sex doesn't exist.

We have talked a lot about patriarchy already. It literally means "father ruled." You'll know you're dealing with feminist criticism if you see this word. Patriarchy describes a culture where men set up the power structures and systems. It's similar to what we studied in CRT where there's the idea that there's systemic racism. Patriarchy is the idea that there's systemic sexism and that this is baked into our culture.

As I mentioned above, when we use the word "sex" in any of these approaches, we are talking about sex assigned at birth (biological). We can observe stereotypes that are based on sex or gender. I love the example of the word "hysterical." It literally comes from the Greek word for uterus. The connotation is of a woman who's out of control. You can't use the term for men. There's a stereotype carried in the word's etymology.

We previously saw the word "other" when we looked at postcolonial criticism. This word occurs in Simone de Beauvoir's reading. This is a member of a dominated out group, and their identity is considered somehow lacking or not

normal, so they may be subject to discrimination by the in group.

We talked about intersectionality. This is the idea that our identities—race, class, sex, gender—are all a mix and there can be overlapping and interwoven systems of discrimination or disadvantage. In groups can also have intersectional privilege.

Queer is related to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.

Finally, you'll know you're dealing with queer theory if you see the word "heteronormative." That's a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. Queer Theory might explore how a text subverts the heteronormative assumptions of the culture that produced it.

## **Slide Nine: Limitations**

There are definitely some limitations to all of these critical approaches, and you can read more in detail in your textbook. Essentialism goes back to that question of what is a woman? Can we really universalize the experience of women? Feminist theory sometimes tries to do that. That's one of the things postfeminism is pushing up against by emphasizing the individuality and choices women have.

Another concern is that we might neglect other identities when we're focusing so heavily on women and men and stereotypes. There's the obvious risk of overlooking the male perspective, and we might not focus as much on the historical and cultural contexts in a feminist approach.

With post-feminism, there's definitely an oversimplification of feminist goals. They have to really oversimplify what feminism is going for in order to say that the goals have been achieved, despite obvious progress.

With choice feminism, is it really true that every choice is

equally valid? I don't know how to handle this limitation, especially in light of the current backlash women are facing in the area of reproductive health.

With the focus on individualism, there may be a lack of intersectionality in this type of approach. But the commodification of feminism might be my own biggest concern. I used the example of Madonna before, and I think you can make an argument that she also represents the commodification of feminism.

Finally, with Queer Theory, there's a concern with complexity and jargon. This might be the biggest limitation. There are so many interesting ideas there, but you're going to have to work really hard to unpack them. All the limits that apply to deconstruction also apply to Queer Theory.

Queer Theory can also be subjective in its approach. And there's the problem of limited representation right now in this particular field. We might inadvertently reinforce stereotypes by choosing a single representation of an identity. We may not always appreciate nuance and complexity.

## **Slide Ten: Checklist and Theoretical Response**

As you choose a text for "Practicing Gender Criticisms," remember that all three approaches are concerned with representation of gender and sexuality, and you don't have to do every one of these things. This is your checklist for your homework this week. The first thing you need to decide is what approach you'll take. The guiding questions should point you toward an obvious direction, but if you feel like you want to take a different approach, just make sure you let me know whether you're applying feminist, postfeminist, or Queer Theory criticism to the text you chose.

You could do a character analysis looking at gender in the text. You could look at the author's gender. You could do a deconstructive reading that focuses on gender and symbolism for gender. You could look at symbols and imagery and consider how they reflect gender stereotypes and cultural norms around gender. And you can look for themes and motifs. One interesting approach might be to look at time and space and how these play out in the text.

Whichever approach you choose, I think you'll have fun with this. Just remember to keep gender at the center of your target. And remember that there's not really a wrong answer for this type of criticism. Just make sure you support your argument with evidence from the text. As always, if you have any questions, please reach out! I really look forward to seeing your responses and application of these theories.



## 48. Feedback

I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)

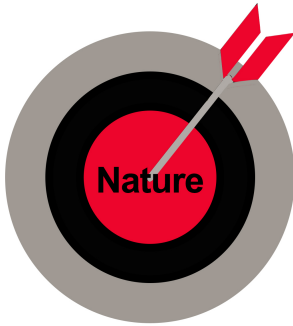


*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cw.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=575>*



## SECTION IX

# ECOCRITICISM



*Ecocriticism explores the interconnectedness between literature and the environment, scrutinizing how texts depict, critique, and shape our understanding of nature, ecosystems, and the human impact on the natural world. In the following chapters, you will learn more about this*

*type of criticism, practice with an AI-generated model essay, review a student essay, apply these skills to a text, and review a lecture presentation.*



# 49. What Is Ecocriticism?



How do we consider the role of nature—of place—in literature? Questions of place and the intersection of literature with the material world have become increasingly popular as our planet continues to warm. While nature is at the center of our target, ecocriticism is an essentially postmodern

approach to literary texts, intersecting with political critiques we've studied in previous sections.

Ecocriticism is a critical approach to literature and culture that focuses on the relationships between human beings and the natural world. It emerged in the 1990s as a response to growing concerns about environmental degradation and the impact of human activity on the planet (Glotfelty and Fromm).

Ecocritics examine the ways in which literature and other cultural forms represent and interact with the natural world. They are interested in exploring the ways in which environmental issues and concerns are reflected in literary texts, considering how literature can be used to raise awareness of environmental issues and promote sustainability and ecological awareness.

Ecocriticism also emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on fields such as biology, ecology, and environmental studies to enrich literary analysis. It seeks to explore the complex and dynamic relationships

between human beings and the natural world, and to uncover the ways in which these relationships are shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors.

One of the key principles of ecocriticism is the importance of environmental justice. Ecocritics are interested in exploring the ways in which environmental issues and concerns disproportionately affect marginalized communities, and in how literature can be used to promote social and environmental justice.

Ecocriticism has been influential in a variety of fields, including literature, cultural studies, and environmental studies. It has been used to analyze a wide range of literary works, from classic literature to contemporary eco-fiction, and has been applied to other cultural forms, such as film and art.

## Learning Objectives

- Use a variety of approaches to texts to support interpretations (CLO 1.2)
- Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation (CLO 2.3)
- Be exposed to a variety of critical strategies through literary theory lenses, such as formalism/ New Criticism, reader-response, structuralism, deconstruction, historical and cultural approaches (New Historicism, postcolonial,

Marxism), psychological approaches, feminism, and queer theory (CLO 4.1)

- Understand how context impacts the reading of a text, and how different contexts can bring about different readings (CLO 4.3)
- Demonstrate awareness of critical approaches by pairing them with texts in productive and illuminating ways (CLO 5.5)
- Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing how textual interpretation can change given the context from which one reads (CLO 6.2)
- Understand that interpretation is inherently political, and that it reveals assumptions and expectations about value, truth, and the human experience (CLO 7.1)

## Scholarship: Defining Ecocriticism

To learn more about ecocriticism as a critical approach and to position it in the history of literary studies, let's look at two excerpts from widely studied ecocritical scholarship. In her introduction to the 1996 book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty provides a good working definition of ecocriticism, positioning this critical theory in literary studies and connecting it with other critical approaches we have learned about in this book. She also gives examples of the kinds of questions that ecocritics ask about texts and contexts.

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the

physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in the sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and desperate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it, and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural



artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

“Introduction” by Cheryll Glotfelty is excerpted from Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

[https://www.google.com/books/edition/The\\_Ecocriticism\\_Reader/eJj4RIFKWCoC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PR17&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Ecocriticism_Reader/eJj4RIFKWCoC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PR17&printsec=frontcover).

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In “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” published in the mid 2000s when ecocriticism was becoming a popular critical approach to literary texts, Ursula Heise traces the history of ecocritical approaches to texts, noting that individual scholars have been taking this approach at least since the 1970s, but that they often worked in isolation until ecocriticism began to receive more institutional attention in the 1990s.

Given the steadily increasing urgency of environmental problems for ever more closely interconnected societies around the globe, the explosion of articles and books in the field may not strike one as particularly surprising. But what is remarkable about this burst of academic interest is that it took place at such a late date; most of the important social movements of the 1960s and 1970s left their marks on literary criticism long before environmentalism did, even though environmentalism succeeded in establishing a lasting presence in the political sphere. Why this delay? The main reason lies no doubt in the development of literary theory between the late 1960s and the early 1990s. Under the influence of mostly French philosophies of language, literary critics during this period took a fresh look at questions of

representation, textuality, narrative, identity, subjectivity, and historical discourse from a fundamentally skeptical perspective that emphasized the multiple disjunctures between forms of representation and the realities they purported to refer to. In this intellectual context, the notion of nature tended to be approached as a sociocultural construct that had historically often served to legitimize the ideological claims of specific social groups. From Roland Barthes's call in 1957 "always to strip down Nature, its Taws' and its 'limits,' so as to expose History there, and finally to posit Nature as itself historical" (*Mythologies* 175; trans. mine) to Graeme Turner's claim in 1990 that "Cultural Studies defines itself in part... through its ability to explode the category of 'the natural'" (qtd. in Hochman 10), the bulk of cultural criticism was premised on an overarching project of denaturalization. This perspective obviously did not encourage connections with a social movement aiming to reground human cultures in natural systems and whose primary pragmatic goal was to rescue a sense of the reality of environmental degradation from the obfuscations of political discourse.

By the early 1990s, however, the theoretical panorama in literary studies had changed considerably. New historicism had shaded into American cultural studies, which styled itself antitheoretical as much as theoretical, signaling not so much the advent of a new paradigm as the transition of the discipline into a field of diverse specialties and methodologies no longer ruled by any dominant framework. Ecocriticism found its place among this expanding matrix of coexisting projects, which in part explains the theoretical diversity it has attained in a mere dozen years. But this diversity also results from its relation to the sociopolitical forces that spawned it. Unlike feminism or postcolonialism,

ecocriticism did not evolve gradually as the academic wing of an influential political movement. It emerged when environmentalism had already turned into a vast field of converging and conflicting projects and given rise to two other humanistic subdisciplines, environmental philosophy and history. This diversity resonates in the different names by which the field has been identified: ecocriticism has imposed itself as a convenient shorthand for what some critics prefer to call environmental criticism, literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism, or green cultural studies (see Buell, *Future* 11-12)....

Like feminism and critical race studies, eco criticism started with a critical reconceptualization of modernist notions of human psychological identity and political subject hood. The ecocritical attempt to think beyond conceptual dichotomies that modernity, the Enlightenment, and science were thought to have imposed on Western culture, the separation of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture, articulated itself, as it did in other fields, through the combination of analytic modes of academic discourse with more experientially based forms of writing that Scott Slovic has called “narrative scholarship” (“Ecocriticism”). But ecocriticism in its first stage differed sharply from other forms of “postmodern” thought in that it sought to redefine the human subject not so much in relation to the human others that subjecthood had traditionally excluded as in relation to the nonhuman world. Environmentalism and ecocriticism aim their critique of modernity at its presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually

labeled “progress.” This domination strips nature of any value other than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis for subsistence. Such domination empties human life of the significance it had derived from living in and with nature and alienates individuals and communities from their rootedness in place.

Heise, Ursula K. “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism.” *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 2, 2006, pp. 503–16. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486328>. Accessed 5 Apr. 2024. Fair Use Exception.

## Using Ecocriticism as a Critical Approach

As you can see, ecocriticism encompasses a broad range of possibilities in how we approach literary texts, and it shares some common features with cultural studies, feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, and postcolonial criticism as well as deconstruction. Here are a few approaches you might consider when using ecocriticism to analyze a text:

1. **Setting and Landscape:** The physical environment where a story takes place can have profound implications on the narrative. An ecocritical approach could explore how the natural setting influences the characters, plot, and themes. This includes not just the beauty or wilderness of landscapes but also environments affected by human activity, urban settings, and even dystopian depictions of future Earths.
2. **Nature and the Non-Human:** Examining the representation of animals, plants, and other non-human elements in literature can reveal insights into human attitudes towards nature and the environment.

Ecocriticism can uncover anthropocentric (human-centered) perspectives versus biocentric (life-centered) or ecocentric (ecosystem-centered) perspectives.

3. **Environmental Justice and Ethics:** This involves the exploration of themes related to justice, such as how environmental damage disproportionately affects marginalized communities, the ethics of human intervention in nature, and the moral considerations of biodiversity conservation. Literature can both reflect and challenge societal attitudes towards these issues.
4. **Human/Non-Human Relationships:** Analyzing the interactions between human characters and the environment or non-human characters can reveal underlying ecological insights or critiques. This includes relationships that are symbiotic, exploitative, or transformative.
5. **Ecological Crisis and Dystopia:** Literature that explores themes of ecological disaster, dystopian futures due to environmental degradation, or post-apocalyptic scenarios can be rich ground for ecocritical analysis. These narratives often serve as warnings or critiques of current environmental policies and practices.
6. **Symbolism and Imagery:** The use of nature-related symbols and imagery in literature can convey deeper meanings about the human condition, society's relationship with nature, and philosophical or spiritual insights related to the natural world. Ecocriticism can explore how these symbols and images function within the broader ecological context of the text.

When applying ecocriticism to literary analysis, scholars are encouraged to consider how these elements interact with traditional literary concerns such as character development, plot structure, and thematic depth, thereby enriching their interpretation of the text's environmental dimensions.

One popular area of ecocritical inquiry is the notion of *place*. Ecocriticism addresses the importance of place in literature by considering how specific locations—wilderness, rural, suburban, or urban environments—shape narratives, characters, themes, and the reader's understanding of the text. Here are a few ways you can use ecocriticism to explore the significance of place in literary texts:

1. **Identity and Place:** Ecocriticism examines how place contributes to the identity of characters, influencing their actions, thoughts, and development. It considers how connections to specific places or disconnections from them (due to displacement, migration, or environmental degradation) affect personal and collective identities.
2. **Cultural and Historical Contexts of Place:** This perspective involves analyzing how literature reflects the cultural and historical significances of particular places. Ecocriticism looks at how narratives are embedded in the historical exploitation, conservation, or reverence of certain landscapes, and how these places hold the memories and histories of communities.
3. **Place Attachment and Sense of Place:** Ecocriticism explores the emotional bonds between people and places, known as place attachment, and how literature articulates these relationships. It investigates the sense of place—a deep understanding and appreciation of the unique characteristics of a place—that can foster a strong connection to the environment and influence behavior towards it.
4. **Environmental Awareness and Place:** Literature can raise awareness about environmental issues specific to a place, such as pollution, deforestation, urban sprawl, or climate change impacts. Ecocriticism examines how texts bring attention to these issues, advocate for environmental justice, and promote a deeper understanding of and

empathy for affected places.

5. **Intersections of Place and Power:** Ecocriticism looks at how power dynamics are played out in the control and ownership of places, including issues related to colonization, industrialization, and environmental policy. It investigates how literature critiques or upholds these dynamics and explores alternative ways of interacting with the environment.
6. **Mythological and Symbolic Dimensions of Place:** This involves the analysis of places that hold mythological or symbolic importance within a narrative, contributing to the text's deeper meanings or themes. Ecocriticism delves into how these places influence the spiritual or metaphysical dimensions of the work.

Through these lenses, ecocriticism not only highlights the environmental themes and issues present in literature but also emphasizes the profound connections between people, place, and the planet. When you use an ecocriticism approach for your analysis, you encourage readers to consider how literature can deepen our understanding of place and inspire a more thoughtful and sustainable interaction with the world around us.

In our next section, we'll look at some ways that this theory can be used to analyze literary texts.

## Applying Ecocriticism to Literary Texts

We first encountered “Dear Phantom Children” in our “Practicing Reader Response Criticism” chapter. I wanted you to consider your subjective response to this text, as a reader living in the twenty-first century, where pandemics and natural disasters have become commonplace. In this section, we will use ecocriticism as a critical lens to reconsider the poem.

## Dear Phantom Children (2018)

*By Catherine Broadwall (formerly Catherine Kyle)*

Dear phantom children  
who hover near the futon frame

like lavender genies or wisps  
of feathered incense smoke, take heed—

we get it. You enjoy the look  
of daffodils and jello. It might be fun

to dress you as a puppy or a cub. We've pushed  
our share of strollers watching neighbor ladies'

babies, and yes, the dappling of sun on plaid  
and board book can be sweet. The thing is,

spirits, we can barely even hold each other—  
our other hands latched to the railing of this speeding  
ship.

\*

To those already here, well, welcome  
to holey vessel. We'll do our best

to patch it up before it's sink or  
kill. We're trying not to polar bear

ourselves or leave you ice cubes  
from which you'll have to hop and



hop, precarious wayfarer. Democracy,  
the ultimate hair-tearing-out group project.

Humanity, the raft that everybody wants  
to steer. For now, don't worry, babies; look—

aurora borealis. Take a load off, babies; look  
at Ursa Major rise.

---

**Catherine Broadwall** (formerly known as Catherine Kyle) is the author of *Water Spell* (Cornerstone Press, forthcoming 2025), *Fulgurite* (Cornerstone Press, 2023), *Shelter in Place* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2019), and other collections. Her writing has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She was the winner of the 2019-2020 COG Poetry Award and a finalist for the 2021 *Mississippi Review* Prize in poetry. She is an assistant professor at DigiPen Institute of Technology, where she teaches creative writing and literature. "Dear Phantom Children" is All Rights Reserved, reprinted here with written permission of the author.

## Questions

1. How does the imagery of "phantom children," "holy vessel," and "polar bear ourselves" contribute to the ecocritical reading of the poem, particularly in terms of human impact on the environment and the future of the planet?

2. In what ways does the poem address the tension between the desire for a traditional family (such as “pushing strollers” and “watching neighbor ladies’ babies”) and the looming environmental crisis (“before it’s sink or kill”)? How does this tension reflect broader ecological concerns?
3. Explore the significance of the metaphors of nature, such as “aurora borealis” and “look at Ursa Major rise,” in the context of the poem’s message about climate change and the decision to have children. How do these natural images inform the ecological themes of the poem?
4. Discuss the implications of the line “spirits, we can barely even hold each other— / our other hands latched to the railing of this speeding ship” in terms of human relationships and ecological responsibility. How does this imagery depict the precariousness of human existence in the face of environmental degradation?
5. How does the poem depict the concept of intergenerational responsibility in the context of climate change? How do the speaker’s reflections on the future for “phantom children” and “those already here” invite readers to consider their own roles in shaping the environmental legacy for future generations?
6. This poem was originally published under the title “Birth Rates Have Dropped to Historic Lows Among Millennials. Here’s What They Have to Say about It.” The poem was republished as part of Broadwall’s 2019 collection *Shelter in Place*. In an interview about the book, Broadwall notes this about the title: “A few people have asked me if the title refers to mass shootings, but actually, shelter-in-place warnings are far more commonly used when toxic fumes, like those from chemical spills, have been released into the air. The book’s epigraph, an excerpt from the American Red Cross, talks about this. When I learned that definition, it seemed like a fitting metaphor for the things

I was writing about. Big things like economic injustice and environmental destruction—these seem to me like poisons that permeate the air, diffuse, and difficult to pin down.” How does this information support an ecocriticism reading of the poem?

**Example of an ecocriticism thesis statement:** In Catherine Broadwall’s poem, “Dear Phantom Children,” the unexpected juxtaposition of smiling Instagram babies and starving polar bears reveals the absurdity of existence for Millennials facing climate disaster, concluding that when humans’ relationship with nature is hopelessly broken, reproduction is no longer a meaningful choice.

## Limitations of Ecocriticism

While ecocriticism offers valuable insights into the relationship between literature and the environment, it also has its limitations as a methodology for literary analysis. These limitations stem from both the scope of ecocriticism itself and the challenges of applying its principles universally across diverse literary works. Some of the notable limitations include:

1. **Anthropocentrism:** Despite its focus on nature and the environment, ecocriticism can still fall into the trap of anthropocentrism, prioritizing human perspectives and values over those of the non-human world. This can limit its ability to fully explore the intrinsic value of nature independent of human interests.

2. **Cultural and Historical Specificity:** Ecocriticism, particularly in its early forms, has been critiqued for focusing predominantly on literature from Western cultures, potentially overlooking the rich environmental themes and perspectives found in non-Western literatures. This can lead to a lack of diversity in ecocritical analyses and an incomplete understanding of global environmental narratives.
3. **Interdisciplinarity Challenges:** While the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism is a strength, allowing for insights from environmental science, history, philosophy, and other fields, it also poses challenges. Scholars may find it difficult to navigate these diverse disciplines effectively, potentially leading to superficial applications of scientific concepts or a dilution of literary analysis.
4. **Risk of Oversimplification:** In its eagerness to uncover environmental themes, ecocriticism might oversimplify complex literary works, reducing them to their ecological components or messages. This can detract from the multifaceted nature of literature and overlook other important themes and stylistic elements.
5. **Political and Ideological Biases:** Ecocriticism can sometimes be criticized for harboring political and ideological biases, particularly in its advocacy for environmental activism and sustainability. While these perspectives are valuable, they may influence the analysis in a way that prioritizes certain environmental ideologies over a more neutral or diverse exploration of the text.
6. **Universalizing Nature:** Ecocriticism may inadvertently universalize the concept of nature, assuming a common understanding or experience of the natural world that does not account for cultural, geographical, and individual differences. This can lead to generalizations that fail to capture the specificities of how nature is perceived and represented across different contexts.

Despite these limitations, ecocriticism continues to evolve, with scholars addressing these challenges by incorporating more diverse perspectives, refining methodologies, and engaging in interdisciplinary research. By acknowledging its limitations, ecocriticism can deepen its analysis and continue to offer profound insights into the complex relationship between literature and the environment.

## Ecocriticism Scholars

Ecocriticism has a rich field of scholars who have significantly contributed to its development and proliferation as a critical lens within literary and cultural studies. Here are some of the most prominent figures in ecocriticism:

- **Cheryll Glotfelty:** One of the pioneers of ecocriticism, Glotfelty is often credited with helping to establish ecocriticism as a distinct field within literary studies. She co-edited *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), a seminal text that helped define the scope and objectives of ecocriticism.
- **Lawrence Buell:** Buell is a prominent figure whose works have greatly contributed to the understanding and application of ecocriticism. His book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of*

*American Culture* (1995) is highly influential, offering critical insights into how literature can shape our relationship with the natural world.

- **Greg Garrard:** Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) is widely used as an introductory text in the field, providing a comprehensive overview of ecocritical theory and its application to literary studies. His work emphasizes the diversity of approaches within ecocriticism and its relevance to contemporary environmental issues.
- **Ursula K. Heise:** Heise is known for her interdisciplinary approach to ecocriticism, blending literary analysis with insights from cultural geography, environmental history, and science studies. Her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008) explores the global dimensions of environmental literature and thought.
- **Val Plumwood:** Although more broadly known for her work in environmental philosophy, Australian philosopher Val Plumwood's contributions to feminist ecocriticism and her critique of anthropocentrism have been influential in ecocritical thought. Her work challenges dualistic thinking in Western philosophy that separates nature and culture, humans and non-humans.
- **Timothy Morton:** Known for his work on the concept of "dark ecology" and the idea of "hyperobjects," Morton's writing, including *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking*

*Environmental Aesthetics* (2009), challenges traditional notions of nature and encourages a radical rethinking of ecological relationships.

- **Joni Adamson:** Adamson explores intersectional themes of Indigenous knowledge, environmental justice, and ecocriticism in her 2001 book *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*

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# 50. Generative AI Model Essay

I will be using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" for each AI-generated model essay. Read through the poem again first, then read the AI-generated essay. Finally, review my annotations on the essay, where I have highlighted terms to use, corrected the AI's mistakes, and added some things that are missing, most notably, a thesis statement. Reviewing these examples may give you some ideas about how you can use generative AI in your own approaches to texts. When generative artificial intelligence is used to *augment* thinking, it's a useful tool. But if we try to use it to *replace* thinking, we're not learning what we need to know.

Note on this section: I have used ChatGPT 3.5 to generate the AI model essays for previous chapters in this book. For this chapter, I have used ChatGPT 4.0, a more advanced Large Language Model. When we compare this essay with some of the previous essays in the book, we can see the advantages of the more advanced model.

## Model AI Essay: Ecocriticism

### “Interpreting Nature and Love in John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’: An Ecocritical Perspective”

In the tapestry of English literature, John Donne’s poetry emerges as a complex interweaving of passion, intellect, and metaphysical inquiry. Situated against the backdrop of 16th century England—a period marked by profound shifts in scientific, religious, and philosophical thought—Donne’s work reflects the tensions and transformations of his time. This essay employs an ecocritical lens to explore “The Canonization,” revealing how Donne’s meditation on love extends beyond the realm of the personal to offer insights into the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Through this analysis, I argue that Donne’s poem critiques the emergent anthropocentric worldview of his era, advocating for a more integrated and reciprocal understanding of human and natural systems.

At the heart of “The Canonization” lies Donne’s portrayal of love as a force of nature, both transformative and transcendent. The poem’s speakers, defiant in the face of societal scorn, assert the sanctity

of their love, drawing upon natural imagery to convey its power and purity: “we in us find the eagle and the dove.” This juxtaposition of the eagle, symbolizing sovereignty and transcendence, with the dove, emblematic of peace and love, underscores the multifaceted nature of love, mirroring the complexity of the natural world. Furthermore, the reference to the phoenix—a mythic bird that dies in flames only to rise anew from its ashes—serves as a potent metaphor for the cyclical processes of nature and the regenerative power of love. Through these images, Donne suggests a symbiosis between the human and natural realms, challenging the notion of humanity as separate from or superior to nature.

The ecocritical perspective illuminates Donne’s implicit critique of anthropocentrism—the belief that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. In 16th century England, the dawn of the Scientific Revolution began to reshape perceptions of nature, increasingly viewing it as a resource to be studied, controlled, and exploited. Against this backdrop, Donne’s poetic celebration of love’s indomitable spirit can be read as a subtle rebuke to the reductive view of nature as mere backdrop or commodity. Instead, “The Canonization” champions a more holistic view, where human experiences like love are intertwined with the natural world, each reflecting and reinforcing the value of the other.

In the poem’s concluding stanzas, Donne envisions the lovers’ story as “fit for verse,” a testament to love’s enduring legacy that transcends physical monuments: “And by these hymns, all shall approve / Us canonized

for Love.” Here, the act of canonization serves as a metaphor not only for the elevation of love but also for a re-sanctification of nature. By immortalizing their love in poetry—a form of artistic creation that mirrors nature’s own creativity—Donne posits art and love as means to recognize and reverence the natural world. Thus, the poem itself becomes an ecocritical text, advocating for an awareness of and engagement with the intricate connections between human emotions and ecological systems.

In conclusion, “The Canonization” emerges under ecocritical scrutiny as a rich exploration of the interdependencies between love, humanity, and the natural world. By weaving together the personal and the universal, the human and the non-human, Donne challenges the nascent anthropocentrism of his time, advocating for a view of nature imbued with mystery, beauty, and intrinsic value. This ecocritical reading not only enriches our understanding of Donne’s work but also offers timeless insights into the role of literature in reflecting and shaping our relationship with the environment. In a world facing unprecedented ecological challenges, Donne’s poetic fusion of love and nature serves as a poignant reminder of the need for a harmonious coexistence with the world we inhabit.

I have **bolded terms and phrases** that you should use when you practice ecocriticism.

## “Interpreting Nature and Love in John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’: An Ecocritical

## Perspective”

In the tapestry of English literature, John Donne’s poetry emerges as a complex interweaving of passion, intellect, and metaphysical inquiry. Situated against the backdrop of 16th century England—a period marked by profound shifts in **scientific**, religious, and philosophical thought—Donne’s work reflects the tensions and transformations of his time. This essay employs an **ecocritical** lens to explore “The Canonization,” revealing how Donne’s meditation on love extends beyond the realm of the personal to offer insights into the relationship between **humanity and the natural world**. Through this analysis, I argue that Donne’s poem critiques the emergent **anthropocentric worldview** of his era, advocating for a more integrated and **reciprocal** understanding of **human and natural systems**.

Aside from the use of the word “tapestry” (which has become something of a ChatGPT trope), I like how this introduction establishes the framework for the analysis and provides some background information that I think is essential to an ecocritical approach to the poem. As we learned in our first chapter, ecocriticism can be applied to any text from any time. In Donne’s time, pastoral poetry was popular. If I were writing this paper, I would probably mention this and perhaps even attempt to situate this poem and Donne within that genre. Information that is important to ecocriticism includes 1) establishing the period when Donne wrote (16th century England—you would cite a source for this); 2) mentioning metaphysics (often associated with Donne’s work—metaphysics is literally “about nature.”); 3) discussing the scientific discoveries occurring during Donne’s lifetime. This background information establishes that ecocriticism is a good choice for analyzing this text. I would remove phrases like “through this analysis, I argue” because they are redundant, but this is an interesting and effective ecocriticism thesis statement for the

poem: Donne's poem critiques the emergent **anthropocentric worldview** of his era, advocating for a more integrated and **reciprocal** understanding of **human and natural systems**.

At the heart of "The Canonization" lies Donne's portrayal of love as a **force of nature**, both **transformative** and transcendent. The poem's speakers, defiant in the face of societal scorn, assert the sanctity of their love, drawing upon **natural imagery** to convey its power and purity: "we in us find the eagle and the dove." This juxtaposition of the eagle, symbolizing sovereignty and transcendence, with the dove, emblematic of peace and love, underscores the multifaceted nature of love, mirroring the **complexity of the natural world**. Furthermore, the reference to the phoenix—a mythic bird that dies in flames only to rise anew from its ashes—serves as a potent **metaphor** for the **cyclical processes of nature** and the regenerative power of love. Through these images, Donne suggests a **symbiosis between the human and natural realms, challenging the notion of humanity as separate from or superior to nature**.

This first body paragraph focuses on the imagery of nature in the poem. This is a good approach. As we learned, identifying and analyzing natural imagery can help us to understand more about the relationship between humans and the natural world. I think the discussion of the phoenix representing the cyclical processes of the natural world is particularly good, though I might go even further and talk about how this image also represents the speaker's love. The decision to use speaker vs. the author's name (Donne) depends on the approach you are taking. If you are sticking to the text, I think using "the speaker" is more appropriate than something like "Through these images, Donne suggests." Another reason I feel that way is that I disagree with the LLMs apparent argument that Donne was doing this on purpose. Focusing on the text instead of the author makes more sense when analyzing an older poem like this one through a newer lens like ecocriticism.

The **ecocritical** perspective illuminates Donne's implicit **critique of anthropocentrism**—the belief that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. In 16th century England, the dawn of the **Scientific Revolution** began to reshape **perceptions of nature**, increasingly viewing it as a **resource to be studied, controlled, and exploited**. Against this backdrop, Donne's poetic celebration of love's indomitable spirit can be read as a subtle **rebutal to the reductive view of nature as mere backdrop or commodity**. Instead, "The Canonization" champions a more holistic view, **where human experiences like love are intertwined with the natural world, each reflecting and reinforcing the value of the other**.

This is where the paper got interesting for me, and I hope you pay attention to this paragraph. In ecocriticism, it's quite common to see scientific processes and insights applied to literary texts. The overlap with biological and environmental sciences (and sometimes even physics) is one of the more fascinating aspects of ecocriticism for me personally. I can't decide (as with the previous paragraph) whether Donne is actually engaging in a subtle critique of reducing nature to a commodity though. Stressing more about his metaphysical background might strengthen this section.

In the poem's concluding stanzas, Donne envisions the lovers' story as "fit for verse," a testament to love's enduring legacy that transcends physical monuments: "And by these hymns, all shall approve / Us canonized for Love." Here, the act of canonization serves as a **metaphor** not only for the elevation of love but also for a **re-sanctification of nature**. By immortalizing their love in poetry—a **form of artistic creation that mirrors nature's own creativity**—Donne posits art and love as means to **recognize and reverence the natural world**. Thus, the poem itself becomes an **ecocritical text, advocating for an awareness of and engagement with the intricate connections between human emotions and ecological systems**.



I don't actually think that Donne saw canonization as "the resanctification of nature." I think he was using the metaphor to implicitly critique the church and society. But I do think that the poem can be understood this way. If this paragraph were written to say "In the poem's concluding stanzas, the speaker envisions the lover's story..." I would be more willing to accept this as support for the overall argument. Also, I think acknowledging what Donne (and most critics) probably thought was meant by the canonization metaphor is important. The idea that the poem becomes an ecocritical text is super cool though.

In conclusion, "The Canonization" emerges under **ecocritical** scrutiny as a rich exploration of the **interdependencies between love, humanity, and the natural world**. By weaving together the **personal and the universal, the human and the non-human**, Donne challenges the **nascent anthropocentrism** of his time, **advocating for a view of nature imbued with mystery, beauty, and intrinsic value**. This **ecocritical** reading not only enriches our understanding of Donne's work but also offers timeless **insights into the role of literature in reflecting and shaping our relationship with the environment**. In a world facing unprecedented ecological challenges, Donne's **poetic fusion of love and nature** serves as a poignant reminder of the need for a **harmonious coexistence with the world we inhabit**.

This conclusion reeks of ecocriticism. The LLM has pulled out all the stops here in focusing on the relationship between humans and the natural world that is at the heart of ecocriticism. I think this conclusion is a little boring though, and as I mentioned above, I am not convinced that Donne was challenging "nascent anthropocentrism" in this poem, though I do think that this is a reasonable ecocritical reading of the text. With some editing, more background, sources, and a more clearly explicated argument, this could be a decent ecocritical analysis.

# 51. Student Essay

## Example: Ecocriticism

If you'd like to see a student example of ecocriticism, here is a link to Emily Everett's essay "How Shakespeare Blurred the Lines Between Humans and Nature." (Indiana University Celebration of Student Writing, 2022).

## 52. Practicing Ecocriticism

Now that you've learned about ecocriticism, practiced this methods of analysis with "Dear Phantom Children," and reviewed some examples, you will complete a **theoretical response** to a text using ecocriticism as your approach. You will read three different texts below. Choose one text and respond to the questions in a short essay (500-750 words).

I have included questions to guide your reading. You may choose to respond to some or all of these questions; however, your response should be written as a short essay, and you will need to come up with a thesis statement about your chosen text. Post your short essay as a response to the Ecocriticism Theoretical Response discussion board. I have included the theoretical response assignment instructions at the end of this chapter.

### Checklist for Practicing Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism focuses on the relationships between humans and the natural world and how this is reflected in literary texts. Here's a checklist that may help you. You do not need to address every item on this list.

1. **Identify Environmental Themes and Symbols:**

Are there themes related to nature, the environment, or ecological issues? How does the text address concepts like nature, wilderness, or urban environments? Does the text use symbols or metaphors that draw on natural elements or ecological concepts?

2. **Examine Human-Nature Relationships:** What types of relationships are shown between human beings and the natural world? Are these relationships depicted as harmonious, exploitative, or something in between? Are humans centered in the text?

3. **Consider the Role of Place:** How does the setting influence the narrative, characters, or themes? Does the text's setting in a specific environment (rural, urban, wilderness) play a critical role in the development of the story?

4. **Evaluate the Presence of Ecological Crisis:** Is there an ecological crisis or environmental concern presented in the text? How do the characters respond to this crisis, and what does it suggest about societal attitudes towards the environment?

5. **Examine the Impact of Cultural and Historical Contexts:** How do the historical or cultural contexts of the text influence its portrayal of environmental issues? Are there specific environmental attitudes or issues that reflect the time period or culture in which the text was written?

6. **Explore Environmental Ethics and Values:**

What ethical considerations regarding the environment can be identified in the text? Does the text suggest a particular stance on environmental responsibility or sustainability?

7. **Reflect on Personal and Societal Implications:**

How does the text encourage readers to think about their own relationship with the natural world? What implications might the text have for contemporary environmental issues or attitudes?

## 1. Excerpt from *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021)

That was one reason why we always thought so much about being in the window. Each of us had been promised our turn, and each of us longed for it to come. That was partly to do with what Manager called the “special honour” of representing the store to the outside. Also, of course, whatever Manager said, we all knew we were more likely to be chosen while in the window. But the big thing, silently understood by us all, was the Sun and his nourishment. Rosa did once bring it up with me, in a whisper, a little while before our turn came around.

“Klara, do you think once we’re in the window, we’ll receive so much goodness we’ll never get short again?”

I was still quite new then, so didn’t know how to answer, even though the same question had been in my mind.

Then our turn finally came, and Rosa and I stepped

into the window one morning, making sure not to knock over any of the display the way the pair before us had done the previous week. The store, of course, had yet to open, and I thought the grid would be fully down. But once we'd seated ourselves on the Striped Sofa, I saw there was a narrow gap running along the bottom of the grid – Manager must have raised it a little when checking everything was ready for us – and the Sun's light was making a bright rectangle that came up onto the platform and finished in a straight line just in front of us. We only needed to stretch our feet a little to place them within its warmth. I knew then that whatever the answer to Rosa's question, we were about to get all the nourishment we would need for some time to come. And once Manager touched the switch and the grid climbed up all the way, we became covered in dazzling light.

I should confess here that for me, there'd always been another reason for wanting to be in the window which had nothing to do with the Sun's nourishment or being chosen. Unlike most AFs, unlike Rosa, I'd always longed to see more of the outside – and to see it in all its detail. So once the grid went up, the realisation that there was now only the glass between me and the sidewalk, that I was free to see, close up and whole, so many things I'd seen before only as corners and edges, made me so excited that for a moment I nearly forgot about the Sun and his kindness to us.

I could see for the first time that the RPO Building was in fact made of separate bricks, and that it wasn't white, as I'd always thought, but a pale yellow. I could now see too that it was even taller than I'd imagined – twenty-two stories – and that each repeating window was underlined by its own special ledge. I saw how the Sun had drawn a diagonal line right across the face of

the RPO Building, so that on one side of it there was a triangle that looked almost white, while on the other was one that looked very dark, even though I now knew it was all the pale yellow colour. And not only could I see every window right up to the rooftop, I could sometimes see the people inside, standing, sitting, moving around. Then down on the street, I could see the passers-by, their different kinds of shoes, paper cups, shoulder bags, little dogs, and if I wanted, I could follow with my eyes any one of them all the way past the pedestrian crossing and beyond the second Tow-Away Zone sign, to where two overhaul men were standing beside a drain and pointing. I could see right inside the taxis as they slowed to let the crowd go over the crossing – a driver's hand tapping on his steering wheel, a cap worn by a passenger.

The day went on, the Sun kept us warm, and I could see Rosa was very happy. But I noticed too that she hardly looked at anything, fixing her eyes constantly on the first Tow-Away Zone sign just in front of us. Only when I pointed out something to her would she turn her head, but then she'd lose interest and go back to looking at the sidewalk outside and the sign.

*Excerpt from Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro is all rights reserved and is used under a Fair Use rationale. This passage comes from an excerpt in The Guardian published in 2021.*

## Questions

1. **How does the passage depict the relationship between technology (AFs) and the natural world (the Sun)?** Consider the role of the Sun as a source of “nourishment” for Klara and Rosa. What does this suggest

about the interdependence between technological beings and natural elements?

2. **What does the longing for the Sun's "goodness" reveal about the characters' connection to the environment?**  
Explore how the AFs' desire for the Sun's light reflects broader themes of environmental sustenance and well-being. How does this parallel human dependence on natural resources?
3. **How is the urban environment portrayed through Klara's observations from the window?** Analyze Klara's detailed observations of the outside world, including the RPO Building and the passers-by. What do these observations tell us about the interaction between urban life and the natural environment?
4. **What significance does the glass window hold as a barrier between the AFs and the outside world?**  
Discuss the symbolic meaning of the glass window in separating Klara and Rosa from the natural and urban environments they observe. How does this reflect broader themes of isolation or connection in the context of environmental and technological interaction?
5. **In what ways does the passage challenge or reinforce the notion of anthropocentrism?** Consider Klara's and Rosa's roles as observers of the human and non-human elements of their environment. How



does their perspective as artificial entities affect the narrative's portrayal of human centrality in relation to the natural world?

## 2. The Song of Wandering Aengus

BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

I went out to the hazel wood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread;  
And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.  
When I had laid it on the floor  
I went to blow the fire a-flame,  
But something rustled on the floor,  
And someone called me by my name:  
It had become a glimmering girl  
With apple blossom in her hair  
Who called me by my name and ran  
And faded through the brightening air.  
Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done,  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun.

## Questions

1. **How does Yeats use natural imagery to convey the themes of the poem?** Explore how the elements of nature (the hazel wood, the silver trout, the apple blossom) are not just settings or backdrops but integral to the poem's exploration of longing and transformation. What might these elements symbolize in relation to humanity and the natural world?
2. **What role does the transformation from the trout to the glimmering girl play in the poem's ecological imagination?** Consider the significance of metamorphosis in the poem. How does this transformation affect the poem's view on the relationship between humans and nature? Is there a suggestion of interconnectedness or fluidity between human and non-human worlds?
3. **In what ways does the poem reflect on the passage of time through its depiction of nature?** Analyze how the temporal aspects of the poem (the lifecycle of moths, the aging of Aengus, the ancient "mothlike" stars) are intertwined with natural imagery. How do the references to "time and times are done" and the "silver apples

of the moon, the golden apples of the sun” contribute to the poem’s reflections on time, nature, and eternity?

4. **How does the poem’s setting in a natural landscape contribute to its exploration of desire and fulfillment?** Consider the significance of the natural landscape to the poem’s narrative arc. How does Aengus’s journey through various lands in search of the glimmering girl reflect broader themes of human longing for connection with nature or the divine?
5. **What does the poem suggest about the relationship between humanity and the natural world?** Reflect on the overarching message of the poem regarding humans’ place in nature. Does Yeats portray this relationship as harmonious, mystical, or conflicted? How do the poem’s images and themes contribute to contemporary ecological discussions about the human-nature bond?

*“The Song of Wandering Aengus” by W.B. Yeats is in the public domain.*

### 3. The Peddler of Flowers

By Amy Lowell

I came from the country  
With flowers,  
Larkspur and roses,

Fretted lilies  
In their leaves,  
And long, cool lavender.  
I carried them  
From house to house,  
And cried them  
Down hot streets.  
The sun fell  
Upon my flowers,  
And the dust of the streets  
Blew over my basket.  
That night  
I slept upon the open seats  
Of a circus,  
Where all day long  
People had watched  
The antics  
Of a painted clown.

*"The Peddler of Flowers" by Amy Lowell is in the public domain.*

## Questions

1. **How does Lowell contrast the natural and urban environments in the poem?** Examine the juxtaposition of the country flowers with the hot streets and the urban setting. What does this contrast reveal about the relationship between nature and urbanization?
2. **What is the significance of the flowers in the poem?** Explore the symbolic meaning of the

flowers (larkspur, roses, lilies, lavender) and their journey from the countryside to the city. How do the flowers represent the natural world, and what does their fate in the urban setting suggest about human engagement with nature?

3. **How does the poem address themes of commodification and consumption?** Consider the role of the peddler and the act of selling flowers in the city. What commentary does the poem provide on the commodification of nature? How does the poem critique or reflect on the consumption of natural beauty in an urban context?
4. **What role does imagery play in shaping the poem's ecological perspective?** Analyze the poem's imagery, particularly the sun's effect on the flowers and the dust covering the basket. How do these images enhance the poem's message about the impact of the urban environment on nature?
5. **What does the poem suggest about the human-nature relationship within an urban landscape?** Reflect ON the broader implications of the poem for understanding the human-nature relationship in urban settings. Considering the peddler's experience and the fate of the flowers, what

insights does the poem offer about the place of nature in city life and the possible disconnection between urban dwellers and the natural world?

## Theoretical Response Assignment Instructions

For each of the critical approaches we study in *Critical Worlds*, you will write a short response that demonstrates your beginning understanding of the concept by applying the approach to a text. Treat these responses as short essays. The responses are intended to help you find what you do and don't understand about the critical approach so that we can discuss the approach as a class.

### Instructions

**Step One:** At the end of each section in *Critical Worlds*, you will find a chapter called “Practicing [Theoretical Approach].” (For example, “Practicing New Criticism”) Read **all** the works in this section and be prepared to discuss them on our class discussion board or in class.

**Step Two:** Choose **one** of the works to write about in your response. For example, you will read all four of the short works in the New Criticism section, but you will only respond to one, perhaps “Recuerdo” by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Refer to our course schedule for due dates.

**Step Three:** Use the questions that follow the one work you've chosen to prompt your response. Your final response should

be written as a short essay that considers the key elements of each question, 500-750 words in length (3-4 complete paragraphs). When you directly quote the text, use MLA style and include page or line numbers in parenthetical citations for later reference. Do your best, and please reach out if you need help.

**Step Four:** Submit your response by copying and pasting it into the discussion board forum designated for this assignment. **Do not attach your response as a Word document.** Refer to the course schedule for due dates. I strongly recommend that you draft your response in Word or another software program that includes a grammar and spelling checker.

**Step Five:** Online students are required to respond to two classmates who chose *different* texts from the one you chose for your response. These responses should both be 100-150 words in length (200-300 words total) and are due by Sunday. *Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss the works in class together.*

## Grading

Each short response is worth 25 points.

- 15 points: theoretical response
- 10 points: online discussion (5 points per response) OR class attendance.

Responses will be graded on adherence to requirements and thoroughness and thoughtfulness of work—not simply on completion. A response that meets the requirements but is perfunctory in manner may receive a “C.”

*Note: I do not expect you to apply the theory perfectly to earn*

*a high grade. These responses are about practicing an approach, not mastering it.*



# 53. Ecocriticism

## Lecture Notes and Presentation



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=925#oembed-1>*

### Slide One: Ecocriticism: Literature and Nature

Welcome. I'm Dr. Liza Long. In this presentation, we'll learn more about Ecocriticism, an exciting form of literary criticism that places nature at the center of our target. In this presentation, my goal is to introduce you to ecocriticism and explain why it's so important. I would say that ecocriticism may be one of the most popular critical theories in literary studies today, which makes sense if you take a minute to look outside at the weather.

One of my goals in writing *Critical Worlds* was to make sure that my students had at least a brief introduction to ecocriticism, which was not really covered in our previous textbook for the course. Those of you heading on to four-year schools, either in creative writing or in English literature, and especially those of you who want to get a master's degree or

a doctorate, will find that this is a very important and relevant critical lens.

Ecocriticism, at its heart, asks us to look at the intersection of literature and nature. You might also see this method referred to as “green” criticism.

Concerns about climate change are an integral part of this approach. Thinking about climate change and what it means to you personally is one way to start down your path with ecocriticism. Our text for this chapter gives us a second look at a poem we already used for subjective reader response, Catherine Broadwall’s “Dear Phantom Children.” When Catherine first published the poem as part of her environmentally focused collection *Shelter in Place*, I thought, this is such a great text to use to teach an ecocritical lens, because every part of this poem really addresses the things we were talking about in our chapter. The poem captures our fears, concerns, confusion and also the joy and wonder that surround our interactions with the natural world and how humans are influencing and are influenced by nature.

You may see some overlaps with Marxist and cultural studies criticism, and ecocriticism also has a deconstructive element to it. But where ecocriticism really starts to differ from those other lenses is that it’s more focused on an interdisciplinary approach with science in a way that those other lenses aren’t—or at least, are not to the extent that we see with ecocriticism.

It’s hard to pinpoint an exact moment when this critical theory emerged. I talk about it emerging in the 1990s, and certainly some of the first texts that were identified as ecocriticism were published in the 1990s. However, the exploration of nature in literature has been going on for a long time. Maybe you’ve heard of pastoral criticism, which is where I focused some of my own research, looking at pastoral poetry by Theocritus and Vergil. There are lots of different ways that critics were exploring nature in texts before it became a formal method. Many people who were doing this kind of work, using

texts to interrogate the changes of the natural world that humans were causing, were initially working largely in isolation.

If you watched *The Three Body Problem* on Netflix (or better yet, read the three books by Cixin Liu—two of them were translated by Hugo winning Ken Liu, one of my favorite sci-fi authors), you might have noticed that two of the main characters frequently reference the biologist Rachel Carson's 1972 book *Silent Spring*, a beautifully written foundational ecology text about the role that DDT was playing in decimating songbird populations,

Carson's book could be credited with inspiring the way literary scholars started thinking about what we are doing to the natural world, and this particular approach continues to be very interdisciplinary. When you look at scholarship, you'll often see biologists or ecologists or people in environmental studies using literature as a cultural artifact, just like we might see anthropologists using literature as a cultural artifact in a cultural studies approach.

Environmental justice is increasingly a concern with this type of literature. You may have heard of the cli-fi, or climate fiction, genre. This is a subset of science fiction that focuses specifically on climate change. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Ministry for the Future* is a fantastic example with lots of realistic solutions to climate change that are already in our existing technology, things that we could do now. I like to recommend that book if you are feeling bad about climate change.

To summarize, ecocriticism looks at nature as an artifact in texts, with a contemporary focus on human caused climate change and how that's reflected in literature, and it's not limited to any one period. Just like all the other lenses we studied, we can look back at things that were written in Roman times or Greek times or ancient China, for evidence of the intersection between literature and the environment.

## Slide Two: Scholarship

The scholarship you'll read includes a brief excerpt from Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). This is the most commonly assigned introductory text for this critical method, and I recommend checking it out from the library. I particularly like this quote from the introduction for positioning ecocriticism within the methods we have already studied:

"Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies."

That's really what it is. If you're doing that, you're doing ecocriticism.

Ursula Heise is another prominent scholar working with this method. This is an older article, but she continues to publish in this field, and she gives a good example to start off this essay that I think will resonate with you. We have access to this essay in JSTOR, and I'd recommend reading the whole essay if you have time. Heise writes,

"Environmentalism and ecocriticism aim their critique of modernity at its presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled "progress."

Here, Heise is really interrogating ideas like Manifest Destiny and asking, is that really progress?

Compared with Judith Butler from our previous chapter,

these scholars should feel more straightforward to you. As a reminder, we'll be finishing our work with the textbook this week and moving into the group project, where you'll create your own literary scholarship. Maybe you'll choose ecocriticism as your critical method.

## Slide Three: How to Do Ecocriticism

So how do we do ecocriticism? Well, just like our other lenses, there's not necessarily a right or wrong way. These are some things you might consider. You wouldn't necessarily do all of these things—you could look at setting and landscape, including dystopias. Critics often consider dystopian fiction like *Klara and the Sun*. In that novel, you could look at the Cootings Machine and its role, for example, or consider how Klara is an intermediary between the Sun (nature) and Josie (a human).

You could also look at nature and the non-human, thinking about how anthropocentric or human centered worldviews are different from biocentric, life centered perspectives, or ecocentric ecosystem center perspectives. Examining literature as an artifact for these types of perspectives gives us an example of how to how to do ecocriticism. As I mentioned, environmental justice and ethics are an important part of this approach. If you're noticing marginalized communities, for example, these are the same marginalized communities we looked at with postcolonial criticism. We're taking the postcolonial critique one step further and asking, how has this environmental damage hurt people in the Global South more than it has hurt people in more affluent Western European countries? That's a very interesting question for literary scholars, especially considering how generative AI development is disproportionately harming the Global South.

Questions of exploitation that are connected to nature or the environment are interesting areas for an ecocriticism

approach. Are humans doing something to the environment? Or are they transformative? Those are interesting questions. I think a lot about the Apollo and Daphne myth when I consider human and non-human relationships. Apollo, the sun god, was chasing Daphne, and Daphne prayed to the gods and was transformed into a tree. Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is a fascinating text to look for human and non-human relationships and transformative human and non-human relationships. Another example that I think would be fun to look at is Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. What does it mean when the author wakes up and is a cockroach?

Ecological crisis and dystopia probably seem like obvious points of inquiry for ecocritics. I already mentioned *Klara and the Sun* here, but you can probably think of many more examples both from literature and pop culture. The Cli-Fi subgenre of science fiction I mentioned previously is rife with dystopias. I have to admit that I'm very attracted to these types of books. During COVID, I taught Margaret Atwood's book *Year of the Flood*, which is part of her Oryx and Crake trilogy, all about ecological crisis and dystopia. That book is really focused on nature and the natural world, and God's Gardeners who are in total opposition to the scientists creating hybrid life forms.

Finally, you could look at symbolism and imagery. We've focused on these things throughout the course, starting with New Criticism, but when we're doing it with this type of approach, we're looking specifically for nature symbols. If I were looking at *Klara and the Sun*, I would probably focus on the sun as a nature symbol and explore what that means in the context of the nonhuman narrator.

The goal is to have fun, of course, while also learning more about literature.

## Slide Four: Ecocriticism and Place

I'm seeing so many dissertations and articles using ecocriticism and the concept of place. You'll recall that we talked about how queer theory had started to challenge our conceptions of linear space and time right? Ecocriticism similarly challenges our perceptions of place—what place actually means and how it functions. Here are a few specific areas of inquiry you could consider:

**Identity and place:** with this approach, you can see how there would be some intersection with postcolonial criticism or perhaps ethnic studies.

**Cultural and historical context of place** looks at historical exploitation or conservation. For example, consider our reverence of certain landscapes, or how places hold the memories and histories of communities.

**Place Attachment and sense of place:** You could look at how literature shows these emotional bonds. Why is place important to the characters? How does it shape the narrative?

**Environmental awareness and place** asks us to consider things like pollution, deforestation, urban sprawl, climate change, impacts, with a focus on

**Intersections of place and power:** this is a reminder that power dynamics underscores the environmental justice approaches of ecocriticism in the same way that it underscores postcolonial criticism and to some extent, ethnic studies. It's an extension of those theoretical approaches, bringing in the natural world and the environment.

**Mythological and symbolic dimensions of place**—I love this approach. If you take my Survey of World Mythology class, we actually spend a whole unit talking about symbolic places like the cave, the mountain, the tree of life, those types of symbolic places like the garden, places that have resonance for us as a species.

As you can see, ecocriticism gives us some fascinating entry points to investigate literary texts.

## Slide Five: Dear Phantom Children

As I mentioned at the beginning, I was so delighted that Catherine Broadwall, who is a dear friend, agreed to let me republish this poem in our textbook. We originally encountered this as one of the practicing reader response texts in Part Three, where I asked for your subjective reader response to the poem, and certainly, thinking about climate change and how it affects you is one valid subjective reader response approach. But now we will take an ecocriticism approach to the same text. Please listen and take a few notes as I read the poem.

Dear phantom children  
who hover near the futon frame  
like lavender genies or wisps  
of feathered incense smoke, take heed—  
we get it. You enjoy the look  
of daffodils and jello. It might be fun  
to dress you as a puppy or a cub. We've pushed  
our share of strollers watching neighbor ladies'  
babies, and yes, the dappling of sun on plaid  
and board book can be sweet. The thing is,  
spirits, we can barely even hold each other—  
our other hands latched to the railing of this speeding ship.

\*

To those already here, well, welcome  
to holey vessel. We'll do our best  
to patch it up before it's sink or  
kill. We're trying not to polar bear  
ourselves or leave you ice cubes  
from which you'll have to hop and



hop, precarious wayfarer. Democracy,  
the ultimate hair-tearing-out group project.

Humanity, the raft that everybody wants  
to steer. For now, don't worry, babies; look—  
aurora borealis. Take a load off, babies; look  
at Ursa Major rise.

With an ecocriticism approach, we want to focus on imagery that intersects with the natural world. Look at how the poem juxtaposes positive images of nature—"the dappling of sun on plaid"—with negative ones—"before it's sink or/ kill." I also love the way the poet uses nouns as verbs: "We're trying not to polar bear ourselves."

When you read the poem as an ecocritic, do you think its overall tone is negative toward the environment or positive? While there are certainly plenty of warnings about climate change, I see the last couplet as largely positive. It's saying, humanity, nature's awesome. Go outside and look at the stars,

The poem was originally titled "Birth rates drop to historic lows among Millennials. Here's what they have to say about it." The poem explores some of the fears that we have for the next generation because of climate change, and what are we leaving them, asking, is it even responsible to bring children into that world?

## Slide Six: Terms to Use

I took this list from the ecocriticism scholar Lawrence Buell and his 2005 book, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. This is a glossary of selective terms that Buell put together, and I encourage you to read the book (or at least the glossary) for more information.

With **anthropocentrism**, we consider how humans place themselves at the center pretty much everything and how this is reflected in literary texts. In contrast, **biocentrism** is where

instead of centering humans, we center life. What happens if we center all life, and we don't pull humans out as somehow special? How might we approach a text differently if we read it that way?

The **bioregion** is a particular area that might have certain characteristics. A **cyborg** is a part human, part tech. We're increasingly seeing the word **dystopia** associated now with the development of generative artificial intelligence. A lot of what we're seeing in fiction today has to do with climate change.

But it's not all negative. With terms like **ecocentrism**, **ecology**, and **environmental justice**, we are considering how texts can promote a more balanced approach to the environment, for example, when we use literature as an artifact to think about sustainability for nature and the natural world.

As I mentioned, I'm very interested in the history of **pastoral** poetry. This is poetry that's set out in the countryside, often involving shepherds, and it's a long tradition in the western canon. Why are people who aren't shepherds so interested in the pastoral life? How does pastoral poetry represent a kind of fantasy for city dwellers? Can you think of any current examples of this? I'm thinking about Instagram and certain influencer accounts like Ballerina Farm. What's the attraction to these poems?

**Wilderness and wildness** hold a similar fascination for us. Think about Jack London's novels, for example, or to use an Idaho writer, Vardis Fisher and Mountain Man.

## Slide Seven: Limitations of Ecocriticism

Of course, as with any critical method, there are some limits to this approach. It's just so hard to pull ourselves out of the center, isn't it? Dealing with ingrained anthropocentrism can be a challenge.

Early versions of ecocriticism tended to focus on literature

from Western cultures. I think we are seeing less of this now, but it's still a concern and possible limitation.

The interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism is both a feature and a bug. Personally, I think it's really cool that we can make literary texts the subject of inquiry for scientists, but different disciplines have different norms. This approach can also lead to superficial applications of scientific concepts, or, on the other side, it can lead to lazy literary analysis. Whenever I think of interdisciplinary challenges, I think about the way that quantum physics just seems to be applied to anything and everything. "Oh, you don't understand something? That's quantum physics! Quantum physics explains everything!" Does it though?

Political and ideological biases could be seen as a limit, but it's also a feature of this approach. Just like Marxist criticism contains an inherent critique of capitalism, ecocriticism focuses on environmental activism. So the question to keep that in mind here is whether we are getting the best reading of a literary text with this approach. I don't know that it's necessarily a problem that people are using literature to highlight and promote their environmental activism and sustainability, as long as people are really clear on their biases, but that would be the case for any argument, right?

A final limitation is that by focusing on the natural world, we can incorrectly universalize a definition of nature or presuppose that everyone sees nature the same way, and this simply isn't true. I encourage you to learn more about Indigenous ways of knowing if you'd like some specific examples of this.

## Slide Eight: Checklist and Theoretical Response

Here's your checklist for your theoretical response. Remember that you don't have to do all these things. Any one of them might be an interesting approach to take. I hope you like the texts that I've chosen. The Yeats poem about wandering Aengus is one of my personal favorites.

I'm surprisingly happy with the way the AI model essay turned out for this section. For most of the textbook, I used ChatGPT 3.5 because it was the free version that most of my students could use. But for this essay, I used the more current ChatGPT 4.0 model. It's a much more robust essay than the ones that 3.5 was writing, but it still has some issues, as you'll see in my annotations.

It's especially interesting to me to use an ecocritical lens on this very old, abstruse and difficult English poem, "The Canonization." I deliberately chose a poem that's difficult to understand throughout the book, so that we could test out these different lenses. I think this model essay really shows you what an ecocriticism essay at this level would look like. I've also included a student essay example for you to review.

Choose your favorite of the three texts and practice using the terminology and checklist in your theoretical response. If you use generative AI to help you with your response, make sure you acknowledge and cite it.

Have a great week, and I hope you enjoy practicing ecocriticism as a theoretical approach to literary texts.

## 54. Feedback

I am currently piloting this open resource textbook and would appreciate your help. Please use this form (also embedded below) to provide feedback. The form is anonymous unless you choose to share your email address with me. Let me know if you have questions: [lizalong@cw.edu](mailto:lizalong@cw.edu)



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://cw.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/?p=927>*



# Course Syllabus

## ***The College of Western Idaho Course Syllabus***

### ***ENGL 211 Literary Analysis Fall 2023***

#### ***Notice of Student and Instructor Accountability***

Students and Instructors are accountable for all information on this syllabus, which is in this course's Blackboard Site.

#### ***Course Information***

English Department  
Literary Analysis  
ENGL 211 001F  
Hybrid Flex (asynchronous)  
Liza Long, Ed.D.  
lizalong@cwidi.edu  
(208) 562-2193 (please email me)

## Catalog Course Description

This course refines literary analysis skills with emphasis on critical approaches and methods. Students will learn techniques in literary research and apply researched, critical perspectives to a variety of texts. PREREQ: ENGL 102, ENGL 190, ENGL 191, or PERM/INST.

## Schedule

This course meets for a regular 15-week hybrid flex session from August 21-December 14 on Tuesdays (in person and asynchronous online) from 1:00-2:15 p.m. in NCAB 311. In this hybrid flex class, I will teach on campus, and as a student, you have the choice to come to campus for class or to watch the asynchronous online presentation and complete all assignments online. *NOTE: Students who attend completely online will have additional weekly online discussion requirements.*

## Instructor Availability

I am here to help you succeed. If you have any questions about the course or our assignments, please contact me.

- My preferred method of contact is email, [lizalong@cwj.edu](mailto:lizalong@cwj.edu). I will try to respond to you within 24 hours, Monday-Friday. I also check email at least once on weekends. If you do not hear back from me within this time frame, please email me again.
- My office hours are Tuesdays 11:30a.m.-12:45 p.m. and Thursdays 11:30am-2:15pm, and 4:00-4:45 p.m. in NCAB



312B or via Zoom and by appointment. If you need to schedule an appointment outside of my posted office hours, just let me know, and we will find a time that works for both of us.

- My office number is (208) 562-2193. However, I only check voice mail once or twice per week, so I strongly recommend that you email me if you have questions or concerns.

## Course Focus

This course is designed for English literature and creative writing majors, especially those planning to transfer to a four-year institution. The course also meets the Research and Writing requirement for Liberal Arts majors. One of my primary goals is to prepare you for the work you will do in upper-division literature courses. To accomplish this goal, we will do a substantial amount of reading and writing each week. We will explore literary analysis, a variety of theoretical approaches to literature, and some basic information on literary research. The culmination of this class will be a group-produced critical edition Pressbooks publication of one of our main texts for the semester. Course Learning Outcomes

1. Consider a wide range of alternatives to a habitual way of approaching texts
2. Analyze literature with attention to style and form as well as content
3. Use accepted methods of literary research and MLA documentation to integrate others' ideas respectfully, accurately, and critically
4. Apply a variety of critical strategies in responding to literature
5. Write literary analysis essays using critical approaches and

- incorporating the ideas of others
6. Discuss the significance of cultural, historical, thematic, and theoretical perspectives in interpreting literature
  7. Deliberate over the kinds of political interpretations made when reading and writing about literature

*Please see the syllabus addendum for expanded course outcomes.*

## Outcomes Assessment

There are 1000 points possible in this course. ***You should expect to spend at least 7.5 hours per week on course activities.*** The course outcomes for English 211 will be assessed in the following manner:

Assignment	Points	Due	Course Outcomes	Estimated Time
Writing Assessment: Biographical Criticism	25	Week One	B	1 hour
Theoretical Response New Criticism	25	Week Two	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours
Peer Review Essay 1	20	Week Three	D	1 hour
MyEssayFeedback Review of Essay 1	5	Week Three	D	.5 hours
Reading Response #1 <i>Klara and the Sun</i>	25	Week Three	A,B,D,F,G	4-5 hours
Theoretical Response Reader Response	25	Week Four	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours
<b>Essay One: Poem</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Week Four</b>	<b>B,D, and E</b>	<b>10 hours</b>
Theoretical Response Deconstruction	25	Week Five	A,B,D,F,G	4-5 hours
Reading Response #2 <i>Klara and the Sun</i>	25	Week Six	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours
Reading Response #3 <i>Klara and the Sun</i>	25	Week Seven	A,B,D,F,G	4-5 hours
Peer Review Essay 2	20	Week Eight	D	1 hour
Theoretical Response: New Historical Criticism	25	Week Eight	A,B,D,F,G	2-3 hours
MyEssayFeedback Review of Essay 2	5	Week Eight	D	.5 hours
Theoretical Response Marxist/Postcolonial Criticism	25	Week Nine	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours
<b>Essay Two: Novel</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Week Ten</b>	<b>B,D, and E</b>	<b>10 hours</b>
Reading Response #4 <i>A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White</i>	25	Week Eleven	A,B,D,F,G	2-3 hours
Short Story Group Project Quiz	25	Week Eleven	A	5 hours
Theoretical Response Psychological Criticism	25	Week Eleven	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours

Peer Review Essay 3	20	Week Twelve	D	1 hour
MyEssayFeedback Review of Essay 3	5	Week Twelve	D	.5 hours
Theoretical Response: Gender Criticism	25	Week Twelve	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours
Theoretical Response: Intersections	25	Week Thirteen	A, D, F, and G	2.5 hours
<b>Essay Three: Article Analysis</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Week Thirteen</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>10 hours</b>
<b>Group Project: Critical Edition of Short Story*</b>		<b>Week Sixteen</b>	<b>C, D, and E</b>	<b>20 hours total</b>
Essay Four (individual)	100	Week Sixteen*	B, C, D, E	10 hours
Annotated Bibliography (group)	40	Week Sixteen*	C, D, and F	3 hours
Critical Edition (group)	100	Week Sixteen	A,B,C,D, F	15 hours
Group Project Peer Assessment	15	Week Sixteen	B, C	1 hour
Reflection (individual)	20	Week Sixteen	A	1 hour
<b>Total</b>	<b>1000</b>			<b>112.5 hours</b>

*\*Groups will set their own internal deadlines for critical edition components. The final website is due to the instructor on Friday of Week 16.*

**Reading Responses:** For our major reading projects over the course of the semester, you will write 500–750-word responses for class discussion. All students will post their reading responses to the discussion board by Thursday at 11:59 p.m. Students who attend class in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss your work together in class. Online students (or anyone who misses class) will earn full credit by providing substantive (150-200 word total) comments on at least two classmates' posts by Sunday

at 11:59 p.m. You will receive detailed guidelines for these assignments.

**Short Theoretical Responses:** For our readings from *Critical Worlds* you will practice application of each theory we study in these 500-750-word theoretical responses. Think of these assignments as “mini-essays.” All students will post their theoretical responses to the discussion board by Thursday at 11:59 p.m. Students who attend in person are not required to post responses to classmates because we will discuss your work together in class. Online students (or anyone who misses class) will earn full credit by providing substantive (150-200 word total) comments on at least two classmates’ posts by Sunday at 11:59 p.m. You will receive detailed guidelines for these assignments.

**Literary Analysis Papers:** You will write three major literary analysis papers over the course of the semester, (1) poem; (2) Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Klara and the Sun*, and (3) your assigned short story. You will receive detailed guidelines for the essays and other supporting assignments (process work, drafts, peer review).

**Article Analysis & Response Paper:** You will choose a peer-reviewed article that analyzes Adrienne Kennedy’s one act play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* and summarize, analyze, and respond to that article. You will receive additional details on that paper and supporting assignments.

**Final Group Project:** For the final project, students will work in small groups to produce a critical edition part for the English 211 publication *Beginnings and Endings*. This part will include a group-produced annotated bibliography and an essay from each student that applies a different theoretical approach to the text. Students will license their work using Creative Commons. You will receive detailed guidelines for this assignment.

## Grading Policy

Essays will be graded using a rubric provided to you. Other assignments will be graded on three levels. These levels are:

- Full Credit (full points). If your work is complete, thorough, and thoughtful, then you will receive full credit.
- Partial Credit. If your work is unevenly developed, misses some directions, or lacks depth of thought, you will receive partial credit.
- No Credit (0 points). If your work is exceptionally uneven, seems perfunctory, or misses directions entirely, or if you fail to turn in an assignment, you will receive no credit.

Assignments must be submitted to Blackboard to receive credit. Blackboard will not accept Google Docs or Pages files, so please make sure that you save your work as a .docx (Word) or pdf file before you submit it.

**Note: Students must submit all four major essays (three literary analysis essays and the article analysis) to earn a passing grade in this course.**

**Grading Scale:** Your work in this course earns you points on a 1000-point scale.

A = 900 – 1000 points

B = 800 – 899 points

C = 700 – 799 points

D = 600 – 699 points

Anything below 600 points is not considered a passing grade for this course.

I will make every effort to give you timely feedback on your work. Reading responses and theoretical responses will be graded within one week of their due date. ***It usually takes me up to two weeks to grade your essays and longer assignments.*** I will let you know if I cannot meet this deadline for any reason. I encourage you to schedule a call or an

appointment with me during office hours any time you have questions about your grades or my expectations for your assignments. If you earn a grade lower than a B on any essay, I encourage you to revise and resubmit your work.

*Note: Concepts expressed in the classroom are for educational purposes, and a student's adherence to any particular belief system will not be used as evaluative criteria.*

## Textbooks and Required Materials

- Long, Liza. *Critical Worlds: A Targeted Introduction to Literary Analysis*. CWI Pressbooks, 2023.  
<https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/lit-crit/> (NOTE: We are piloting this beta version of an open education resource book this Fall semester. Using an OER will save students \$50-70 for textbook costs. Chapters will be available to you the week before they are assigned. I will also be asking for feedback from you on this textbook throughout the semester).
- *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro ISBN-13: 978-0593318171 (You must purchase this book, any format including audio book is acceptable)
- *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, Adrienne Kennedy. Available at no cost through the CWI Library: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/lib/cwidaho/detail.action?docID=310544> I will also provide a pdf of the play in Blackboard.
- *Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition*  
<https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/beginnings-and-endings-a-critical-edition/> (you will be contributing to this book through a group project during the last few weeks of the course).
- Additional readings (poems and short stories) will be available in Blackboard.

# Instructional Conversation

Learning is an active exchange between faculty and student.

As a faculty, I will

- Instruct through required readings, lectures, presentations, and videos.
- Assess through online discussions, major assignments, and a final group project.
- Inform through in-class announcements, Blackboard Course Announcements and emails.
- Facilitate through class discussions, both in person and online.

As a student, you will

- Attend class each week on time and participate in discussions (or watch the recorded presentation and participate in discussion responses on Blackboard).
- Submit work in the required format by the due date on the Course Schedule.
- Participate by asking questions when you need help and contributing to discussions and group project.
- Interact by showing respect to your classmates and your instructor, considering the ideas of others, and engaging in peer review.

## Course Calendar

Please see the attached course schedule and Blackboard calendar for assignment due dates



# Course Expectations

**Make time.** *This class involves extensive reading and writing.*

You will have 50-75 pages to read each week, and you will write short essays weekly. Plan on at least 7.5 hours of reading and writing each week including class time. If you are spending less time than this, you will likely struggle to complete the assignments successfully. If you are spending more than 10 hours per week, please reach out to me for help. Manage your time wisely and read ahead whenever possible.

**Attendance:** In this hybrid flex class, your instructor is teaching from campus, and as a student, you have an option to attend class or to watch the recorded lecture and complete your work completely online. You'll have two options to meet this attendance requirement:

1. Come to class on campus
2. Watch the class recording and complete an additional assignment (posting 150-200 word responses to two classmates' discussion posts). This online course is asynchronous, which means you do not need to log in to the class at a specific time. However, you will need to meet weekly assignment due dates on Thursdays and Sundays. Occasionally (if we have a guest speaker, for example), I may invite students who participate online to join our class remotely. I will send a Zoom link if this happens.

Both methods will meet the attendance requirements for this class, so I encourage you to choose the option that works best for you, and feel free to change your attendance pattern at any time. Regardless of how you choose to attend the course, you will need to post your reading response or theoretical response to our weekly discussion board by Thursday each week at 11:59 p.m.

If you miss class for any reason, you are responsible for asking

about what you missed and working with me to submit late work. If I need to miss a class for any reason, I will notify you on Blackboard and via email. **Absence from class does not excuse you from being prepared when you return.**

**Participation:** Every student is expected to participate in class discussions, small groups, peer review, and outside group work. Participation includes being prepared for class, coming to class on time (if you choose to attend in person), and engaging with the course material and our classmates. I expect each student, whether attending in person or online, to contribute during the week.

**Be prepared for class.** Submit your assignments on time and participate in all course activities.

**Keep an open mind.** Literary texts can be challenging and may present controversial ideas. Please demonstrate respect for each other's views.

**Use your resources.** The Writing Center and the Library are both excellent resources to help you improve your writing and research skills. Additionally, we will be experimenting with using AI assisted feedback in this class. I expect you to use these resources.

**Use of ChatGPT or other AI Tools:** CWI's academic integrity policy has been updated and identifies the following as a violation of academic integrity: "submission of work created by artificial intelligence tools as one's own work." However, I use ChatGPT every day and think it's a fascinating new tool to assist with learning and writing. Thus, I encourage students to use generative AI tools for the following types of tasks:

1. Outlining content or generating ideas.
2. Providing background knowledge (with the understanding that ChatGPT and other generative AI programs are often wrong—Wikipedia is a better resource for this right now)
3. Checking grammar and syntax.

We will use ChatGPT occasionally for in-class activities.

If you choose to use generative AI tools for your essays, you **MUST** do the following:

1. Cite the AI tool (see this resource for more information on how to do this).
2. Write a brief paragraph at the end of your work explaining how and why you used an AI tool. Include the prompts you used, and answer this question: Who is the author of this work? Then explain your answer. You will save this as an appendix to your essay. I reserve the right based on my assessment of your assignment to require you to revise and resubmit all or parts of the assignment if I conclude that you have not used AI tools appropriately.

If I suspect that you have used generative AI tools, **and** you have not included the required citation and reflection, then you will need to meet with me either in person or through Zoom to talk about the assignment. This conversation will include knowledge checks for course content.

**Ask questions.** Whenever you have questions, work with your instructor. I am here to help you succeed! If you cannot attend my regular office hours, please schedule an appointment.

**Submit work on time to Blackboard.** All essays and most other work will be submitted through Blackboard. Familiarity with computers and Blackboard is necessary for this course. Assignments and essays are due by 11:59 p.m. on their due dates. Late initial discussion responses are allowed for a 5-point penalty. **I do not allow late responses to classmates on discussion posts.** *Every student may turn in one of the first three essays up to three days late without penalty.* You will need to submit your essays as Word documents. Microsoft Word is free for CWI students through Office 365. Click this

link for information about downloading and installing it to your computer.

**End of Course Evaluations:** I value your feedback on your experience, and I use end of course evaluations to improve this course for future students. You will earn 5 extra credit points for submitting a screenshot of your end of course evaluation. If 75% of the class submits, I will double the points to 10 for everyone who completes.

**Religious Observance and Holiday Absence Policy:** Students are permitted by college policy to be absent from class to observe a religious holiday. Students who miss class to observe a specified religious holiday are expected to make prior arrangements with their instructor to make up any work missed.

**Communication** in this course will take place in several ways including but not limited to in class announcements, Grade Center, Discussion Board, email, and/or Blackboard announcements. You should check the course announcements each week to make sure you understand the requirements and due dates.

**Electronics in the Classroom:** I encourage the use of technology and e-readers in the classroom, so if you are already using a paperless reading device (e.g., a smartphone, tablet, laptop, etc.), please plan to continue this practice. I expect you to participate in discussions and group assignments without interference from electronic devices. I reserve the right to ask you to put away your device or leave if your focus is on electronics instead of on class participation, or if your use of electronics is disruptive to the learning environment.

**Guests:** Guests are welcome with advance notice to the instructor.

**Eating in the Classroom:** Snacks, water bottles, coffee, etc. are fine to have in class if they do not distract you or others from learning. Please do not smoke or vape in class. Smoking is prohibited on the CWI campus.

**Classroom as a Community:** Our classroom is a community of learners. While we may disagree about ideas, we should all strive to value each other as members of that community. Sometimes learning requires us to examine and challenge our beliefs and assumptions about ourselves and our society. Testing our beliefs and assumptions is an integral part of the learning process, and I ask that you respect your fellow learners in this process.

## **Academic Engagement (Attendance) Prior to Census**

CWI must verify that students have met academic engagement prior to census in order to confirm that students are active in their courses and eligible for financial aid. Academic engagement is active participation by a student in an instructional activity such as attending class, submitting an assignment, participating and/or completing online activities, or one-on-one interactions with the instructor.

In this class, my primary tool in verifying academic engagement is submission of the first week writing assessment to Blackboard. If you are having difficulty meeting this expectation, it is critical that you connect with me as soon as possible.

## **Personal Technical Skills**

This course will not provide information on how to use a computer, use Blackboard, navigate the web or manage electronic files. Students who are having difficulty should contact their instructor, IT Help Desk or Tutoring Services.

Please use the resources listed above or speak with your instructor before dropping a course.

Students must be able to do the following with or without accommodation:

- Use an internet browser to navigate the internet and Blackboard.
- Download, upload, create, save, edit and open documents using Microsoft Office applications, such as Word, Excel and PowerPoint.
- Download and upload audio and video files.

## **Civility and Behavioral Expectations**

The College of Western Idaho is committed to educational excellence and recognizes that to achieve that excellence, students, faculty, and staff have a right to be in a safe environment, free of disturbance and civil in all aspects of human relations. Membership in the CWI learning community places a special obligation on all members to preserve the safe learning environment, regardless of the medium of the environment. It is the responsibility of instructors to determine, maintain, and enforce the standards of behavior required to preserve that safe environment.

Behavior that has a negative impact on the learning environment is prohibited. Such behavior may include, but is not limited to, rude, sarcastic, obscene, or disrespectful and/or disruptive behavior. Instructors will determine the appropriate response to problematic behavior in line with the procedures stated in the CWI Student Handbook. Problematic behavior may result in a student being removed from the class session and/or referred to the CWI Academic Conduct Process. For information on how problematic behavior will be managed, see the CWI Student Handbook. It is the student's

responsibility to check their email to receive notification of any scheduled appointments or other urgent communications.

Any student or other member of the learning community may report a violation of the Student Code of Conduct here.

Academic Integrity One of the College's Core Themes is Instructional Excellence, and in order to achieve Instructional Excellence, academic integrity must be upheld. Academic Integrity is the "commitment to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. ... communities flourish when community members "live" the fundamental values ... consider and discuss the role of ethical values and their ability to inform and improve various aspects of life on and off campus" (The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity, 2019). These values are especially important in how students represent their own learning, ideas, and work. Practicing academic integrity includes, but is not limited to, non-participation in the following behaviors: cheating, plagiarism, falsifying information, unauthorized collaboration, facilitating academic dishonesty, collusion with another person or entity to cheat, submission of work created by artificial intelligence tools as one's own work, and violation of program policies and procedures.

For additional information on academic integrity expectations, see the Student Code of Conduct. Violations may result in disciplinary action ranging from failure of the assignment to failure of the entire course. Acts of academic dishonesty, especially when sanctions are given, are reported and run through the Academic Conduct Process. Repeated acts of academic dishonesty have more severe institutional consequences.

## **Title IX & A Respectful Community**

Title IX guarantees all students the right to an education free

from discrimination on the basis of sex. This includes the right to an education free from sexual harassment, including sexual assault. This may include unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in class, or in online discussion boards or through chat or video conferences. This law also protects students from discrimination based on pregnancy or being a parent and provides support options as well. If you, or someone you know, may have experienced sexual harassment or discrimination of any kind, you are encouraged to report it to the College Title IX Coordinator by completing a report [here](#), or by e-mailing [respectfulcommunity@cw.edu](mailto:respectfulcommunity@cw.edu). Filing a report allows the College to provide supportive measures to those involved. It does not obligate a student to go forward with an investigation, and all information reported is protected under federal law. For more information, [click here](#).

## Student Services

CWI provides a number of offices and services to assist students on their academic journey. Below is a list of the services most commonly accessed by students:

- One Stop Service Centers: Provides assistance with admissions, advising, registration, financial aid, and most other common needs you may have. They are a good first stop for any questions.
- Student Disability Services – Provides accommodations and support for students with a range of disabilities.
- Counseling Services: Short-term counseling for students provided free of charge.
- Library & Research Support: Assists students with research, study skills, textbook reserves and other services key to academic success.
- Tutoring Center: Free tutoring services on a range of



academic subjects, available to all enrolled students.

- Writing Center: Provides strategies to help students identify opportunities to improve the quality of their writing, free of charge.
- Assessment & Testing: Proctoring services for a range of course exams, accommodated testing, and outside certification tests.
- Student Affairs: Provides a range of engagement opportunities, including professional and interest organizations, student government, support for veteran students & families, and CARE Services to support students through unexpected life events.

## **Emergency Procedures**

CWI posts instructions for evacuation in all rooms and encourages everyone on campus to review the CWI Emergency Handbook.

## ***Liberal Arts Research and Writing Course***

This course fulfills the requirement for the Liberal Arts program by meeting the following criteria:

- Students will learn methods of inquiry and research that will prepare them to navigate upper-division coursework.
- Students will write well in a variety of rhetorical contexts, paying attention to audience, voice and style appropriate to an academic research setting.
- Students will become practiced at higher order thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, and creativity.

## **Appendix I: Expanded Course Outcomes**

CLO	Expanded Description
CLO 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Become familiar with a variety of approaches to texts, in the form of literary theories</li> <li>2. Use a variety of approaches to texts to support interpretations</li> <li>3. Recognize how different approaches determine possible outcomes in interpretation</li> <li>4. Deliberate on what approach best suits particular texts and purposes</li> <li>5. Choose appropriate combinations of texts and critical approaches to support an argument</li> </ol>
<p>Consider a wide range of alternatives to a habitual way of approaching texts.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand how formal elements in literary texts create meaning within the context of culture and literary discourse.</li> <li>2. Apply knowledge of formal elements of literature and vocabulary in analysis and discussion of literature</li> <li>3. Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation</li> <li>4. Emphasize what the work does and how it does it with respect to form, content, and context</li> </ol>
CLO 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand how formal elements in literary texts create meaning within the context of culture and literary discourse.</li> <li>2. Apply knowledge of formal elements of literature and vocabulary in analysis and discussion of literature</li> <li>3. Using a literary theory, choose appropriate elements of literature (formal, content, or context) to focus on in support of an interpretation</li> <li>4. Emphasize what the work does and how it does it with respect to form, content, and context</li> </ol>
<p>Analyze literature with attention to style and form as well as content.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use library databases and the web to locate appropriate literary sources (primary or secondary)</li> <li>2. Use correct MLA documentation both in-text and on a Works Cited page</li> <li>3. Synthesize others' ideas with one's own to further an argument</li> <li>4. Present others' ideas fairly whether agreeing or disagreeing</li> </ol>
CLO 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use library databases and the web to locate appropriate literary sources (primary or secondary)</li> <li>2. Use correct MLA documentation both in-text and on a Works Cited page</li> <li>3. Synthesize others' ideas with one's own to further an argument</li> <li>4. Present others' ideas fairly whether agreeing or disagreeing</li> </ol>
<p>Use accepted methods of literary research and MLA documentation to integrate others' ideas respectfully, accurately, and critically.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use library databases and the web to locate appropriate literary sources (primary or secondary)</li> <li>2. Use correct MLA documentation both in-text and on a Works Cited page</li> <li>3. Synthesize others' ideas with one's own to further an argument</li> <li>4. Present others' ideas fairly whether agreeing or disagreeing</li> </ol>

CLO	Expanded Description
CLO 4	<p>1. Be exposed to a variety of critical strategies through literary theory lenses, such as formalism/New Criticism, reader-response, structuralism, deconstruction, historical and cultural approaches (New Historicism, postcolonial, Marxism), psychological approaches, feminism, and queer theory.</p> <p>2. Understand how to perform close readings of texts</p> <p>3. Understand how context impacts the reading of a text, and how different contexts can bring about different readings</p> <p>4. Learn to make effective choices about applying critical strategies to texts that demonstrate awareness of the strategy's assumptions and expectations, the text's literary maneuvers, and the stance one takes in literary interpretation</p>
CLO 5	<p>1. Provide a thoughtful, thorough, and convincing interpretation of a text in support of a well-crafted thesis statement</p> <p>2. Develop the interpretation through a combination of textual and contextual evidence used to support the thesis</p> <p>3. Use effective structure, voice, and tone for literary analysis</p> <p>4. Practice literary research methods according to MLA standards</p> <p>5. Demonstrate awareness of critical approaches by pairing them with texts in productive and illuminating ways</p>
CLO 6	<p>1. Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing exposure to critical strategies that deal with cultural, historical, thematic, and theoretical contexts</p> <p>2. Demonstrate through discussion and/or writing how textual interpretation can change given the context from which one reads</p> <p>3. Understand that reading is an act of invention, not simple reception, and that texts and their meanings can be expanded through the application of critical theory</p> <p>4. Be exposed to the diversity of human experience, thought, politics, and conditions through the application of critical theory</p>

CLO	Expanded Description
CLO 7	
Deliberate over the kinds of political interpretations made when reading and writing about literature.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand that interpretation is inherently political, and that it reveals assumptions and expectations about value, truth, and the human experience</li> <li>2. Demonstrate awareness of the political stance one takes interpreting literature</li> <li>3. Discuss the significance and impact of multiple perspectives on a given text</li> </ol>

# Sample Course Schedule

## ***Course Schedule –English 211 Fall 2024***

### **Instructor: Liza Long**

Here is an overview of the weekly readings, assignments, and due dates for your major essays. Readings are due *before class* if you attend in person or by Thursday at 11:59 p.m. if you attend online. Reading responses and theoretical responses are due to Blackboard by Thursday at 11:59 p.m. Online only students should respond to two classmates by Sunday at 11:59 p.m. Essays should be submitted to Blackboard by 11:59 p.m. on their due dates. The final Group Project is due Friday of Week 16.

**NOTE:** We are piloting a beta version of an open education resource book this semester. Using an OER will save students \$50-70 for textbook costs. I will be asking for feedback from you on this textbook throughout the semester. You may choose to read the book online, or you may download the pdf and print out a physical copy (recommended).

I'll try to keep to this schedule to help you plan. However, occasional changes may be necessary to accommodate needs of this class. Any changes will be announced on Blackboard.

## Week One August 19-25: Introduction to Literary Analysis

Welcome to Week One! This week, we will learn more about different critical approaches to literary texts that we will focus on throughout the course. We will also complete a baseline literary analysis assignment. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

### **Due by Tuesday before class\***

**1.01** Read through the syllabus and let me know if you have questions .25 hours

**1.02** In Class (online students should complete this activity by Thursday): Review the Course Tour PowerPoint .25 hours

**1.03** In Class (online students should complete this activity by Thursday): Overview of Part One (What Is Literature? And What Is Biographical Criticism) of *Critical Worlds*.

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday at 11:59 p.m.*

### **Due by Thursday**

**1.04 Engagement verification survey. You may be dropped from the course if you do not complete this.**

**1.05** Introduce yourself to the class on our Introductions board. .25 hours

**1.06** Read Part One of *Critical Worlds*. 2.5 hours

### **Due by Sunday**

**1.07** Homework: Read "Theories of Time and Space" by Natasha Trethewey .5 hours (note: if you attend class in person, we may have time to work on this together).

**1.08** Annotate (mark up) "Theories of Time and Space," then write a brief 300-600 word (1-2 page) analysis of the poem using Biographical Criticism (*Critical Worlds* Part 1). This is your first week writing assessment, required to verify attendance. Please use MLA style. (Note: I will provide you with examples and models for assignments in Week Two, after the class

completes this baseline assessment). You will earn full credit for submitting an assignment that attempts a biographical analysis of the poem, regardless of grammar, format, or style errors. 1 hour 25 points

**1.09** Start reading *Klara and the Sun* (see page assignments in Bb) 1 hour (feel free to read ahead!)

**1.10** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 2: New Criticism (all chapters) 1.5 hours

## Week Two August 26-September 1: The Text (New Criticism)

In Week Two, we will begin our journey through critical worlds with New Criticism. You are probably already familiar with this method of literary analysis. New Criticism describes the “business” of literature scholars, positing that certain universal elements define literature and point students toward a single meaning for a literary text. You will begin your first essay by choosing one of three assigned poems.

*Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

### **Due Tuesday before class\***

**2.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 2: New Criticism (all chapters) 1.5 hours

**2.02** Read the three poems that may be used for Essay #1 and choose the one you would like to work with. Begin annotating the poem. 1 hour

- Duy Doan's "Mother's Dirge"  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/144381/mothers-dirge-59bc0225c5a1d>
- Afaa Michael Weaver's "American Income"  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/49296/american-income>



- Alison C. Rollin's "Object Permanence"  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/147627/object-permanence-5b7339ac519fe>

**2.03** Attend class Tuesday or review the New Criticism PowerPoint presentation online (*Critical Worlds* Part 3) .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

**Due Thursday**

**2.04** Theoretical Response: New Criticism. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in "Assignments." 3 hours

**Due Sunday**

**2.05** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**2.06** Read *Klara and the Sun* 1 hour ((see assigned pages in *Bb*; complete before Tuesday's class)

## Week Three September 2\*-8: Novel

\*Note: Monday, September 2 is Labor Day. CWI Campus will be closed.

This week, we will begin to work with our novel, *Klara and the Sun* by Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro. We will review terminology you have learned in prior literature courses and begin to explore how we can apply the types of literary criticism we are learning in this course to Ishiguro's work. *Klara and the Sun* deals with several topical issues including the rise of AI, technology disruption, climate change, and the nature of faith. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**3.01** Read *Klara and the Sun* (see assigned pages in Bb)

**3.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Novel PowerPoint presentation online .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

#### **Due Thursday**

**3.03** Reading Response #1 *Klara and the Sun* due. Please see the guidelines and submit your response in the required 3-part format (summary/response/questions) by creating a thread in our forum and copying and pasting your response. Do not attach a document to the discussion.

#### **Due Sunday**

**3.04** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts 1 hour

**3.05** Submit your Essay #1 Poem Rough Draft for peer review.

**3.06** Continue to read *Klara and the Sun* (see Bb for page numbers) 1 hour due by Tuesday of Week Seven

**3.07** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 3 Reader Response (all chapters) before next Tuesday class.

## **Week Four September 9-15: The Reader (Reader Response)**

In Week Four, we will return to *Critical Worlds* to learn about Reader Response criticism. There are two types: receptive (the implied audience) and subjective (you as an individual), and both forms have value as we prepare to learn more advanced methods of inquiry. You will complete peer review and submit the final draft of your first essay on the poem you chose. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**4.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 3 (all chapters): Reader Response 1.5 hours

**4.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Reader Response PowerPoint presentation online .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

**Due Thursday**

**4.03** Theoretical Response: Reader Response. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in "Assignments." 3 hours

**4.04** Essay One Peer Reviews Due 30 points

**Due Sunday**

**4.05** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**4.06 Essay One Poem Due to Blackboard Sunday 11:59 p.m. 100 points**

**4.07** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 4 Deconstruction (all chapters) before next Tuesday class.

## **Week Five September 16-22: The Gap (Deconstruction)**

In Week Five, we will learn about structuralism and deconstruction/postmodernism. Modern critical theory often develops in conversation with art and literature, and we will explore some examples of this phenomenon as well as learning more about "death of the author." Deconstruction is particularly relevant to questions posed in *Klara and the Sun* (which you should continue reading this week. You will need to finish the book by Week 7). *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments.*

### **Due Tuesday before class\***

**5.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part Four: Deconstruction (all chapters)

**5.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Deconstruction PowerPoint presentation .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.* Online students should also read “The Glass Mountain” by Donald Barthelme. This short story demonstrates how deconstruction and postmodern writing developed in conversation.

### **Due Thursday**

**5.03** Theoretical Response: Deconstruction. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in “Assignments.” 3 hours

### **Due Sunday**

**5.04** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates’ posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**5.05** Read *Klara and the Sun* 2 hours due Tuesday Week 7 (Note: It’s a good idea to complete the novel as soon as possible)

**5.06** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 5: New Historicism and Cultural Studies (all chapters) before Tuesday’s class

## **Week Six September 23-29: The Context (New Historicism and Cultural Studies)**

In Week Six, we will use New Historicism and Cultural Studies to consider how the context shapes both the writing and reception of texts. We will learn to view texts as cultural artifacts. You will continue to read *Klara and the Sun*. *Note: The*

*average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments.*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**6.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 5: New Historicism and Cultural Studies (all chapters)) 2 hours

**6.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the New Historicism/Cultural Studies PowerPoint presentation online .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

**Due Thursday**

**6.03** Theoretical Response: New Historicism/Cultural Studies. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in "Assignments." 3 hours

**Due Sunday**

**6.04** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**6.05** Read *Klara and the Sun* 2 hours due Tuesday Week 7 (Note: It's a good idea to complete the novel as soon as possible)

## **Week Seven September 30-October 6: Novel**

In Week Seven, we will complete our reading of *Klara and the Sun*. We will workshop thesis statements for our second essay in class and online. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments. Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**7.01** Complete *Klara and the Sun*.

**7.02** Attend class Tuesday for an essay two thesis statement workshop. Students who attend online should post their thesis statements to the discussion in Blackboard for my feedback. There is no online PowerPoint this week. Use the extra time to work on your essay, schedule an appointment with the writing center, or send a draft of your essay to your instructor for a quick review.

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

### **Due Thursday**

**7.03** Reading Response #2 *Klara and the Sun*. Please see the guidelines and submit your response in the required 3-part format (summary/response/questions) by creating a thread in our forum and copying and pasting your response. Do not attach a document to the discussion.

### **Due Sunday**

**7.04** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts. 1 hour

**7.05** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 6: Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism (all chapters) before class on Tuesday.

## **Week Eight October 7-13: Power (Marxist, Postcolonial, Ethnic Studies Criticism)**

In Week Eight, we will expand our New Historicism and Cultural Studies knowledge to learn more about Marxist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies forms of literary criticism, which use elements of deconstruction to break down the notion of stable historical facts, demonstrating how literature reflects power structures in society. We will also work on the rough draft of our second essay to submit for peer review. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**8.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 6: Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism (all chapters) 1.5 hours

**8.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism PowerPoint presentation online .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

**Due Thursday**

**8.03** Theoretical Response: Marxist, Postcolonial, and Ethnic Studies Criticism. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in "Assignments." 3 hours

**Due Sunday**

**8.04** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**8.05** Submit your Essay #2 Novel Rough Draft for peer review.

**8.06** Read *Critical Worlds* Part 7: Psychological Criticism (all chapters) before class on Tuesday.

## **Week Nine October 14-20: The Mind (Psychological Criticism)**

In Week Nine, we will learn about psychological criticism, exploring different theorists we can apply to literature including Freud, Jung, and Chodorow. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**9.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part Seven: Psychological Criticism (all chapters)

**9.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Psychological Criticism PowerPoint.

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

**Due Thursday**

**9.03** Theoretical Response: Psychological Criticism (choose one activity). Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in “Assignments.” 3 hours

**9.04** Essay Two Peer Reviews Due 30 points

**Due Sunday**

**9.05** Essay Two Novel Due to Blackboard 100 points

**9.06** Read *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (due before class next Tuesday)

## **Week Ten October 21-27: Play and Article Analysis**

In Week Ten, we will turn our attention to drama by reading a one-act play by Obie-award winning playwright Adrienne Kennedy. *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* takes familiar tropes and subverts them, revealing stereotypes that exist in American society. We will use this text to learn about literary scholarship. In Essay Three, you will complete a rhetorical analysis of a scholarly article and respond to that article as a literary scholar. This essay will prepare you to work with sources for our fourth essay. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**10.01** Read *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* 1.5 hours

**10.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Drama PowerPoint presentation online. Review the Essay Three Article Analysis PowerPoint. 5 hours



*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

### **Due Thursday**

**10.03** Reading Response #3 *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* is due. Please see the guidelines and submit your response in the required 3-part format (summary/response/questions) by creating a thread in our forum and copying and pasting your response. Do not attach a document to the discussion.

**10.04** Choose an article to work with for Essay Three from the Essay Three articles folder. You should skim 3-4 articles to find one that resonates with you.

### **Due Sunday**

**10.05** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts. 1 hour

**10.06** Read pdfs of assigned short stories in Blackboard by Sunday of week 11. You will read all the stories and rank them in the order that you want to work with them for Essay Four.

**10.07** Read *Critical Worlds Part Eight: Gender Criticism* (all chapters)

## **Week Eleven October 28-November 3: Gender: Feminist, Postfeminist, and Queer Theory Criticism; BEAM Method of Source Analysis**

This week, we will work with Part Nine of *Critical Worlds* as we learn more about feminist/post-feminist criticism and Queer Theory. We will continue to work on our third essays, article analysis (rough draft due Week 12 for peer review). We will also learn more about rhetorical analysis and literary scholarship as we prepare to locate and use sources for our final essay and group project. We will use the BEAM method to learn

how literary scholars use sources in different ways. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

**Due Tuesday before class\***

**11.01** Read and annotate your chosen article (10.04) about *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*.

**11.02** Read *Critical Worlds* Part Eight: Gender Criticism (all chapters) 1.5 hours

**11.03** Attend class Tuesday or review the Gender Criticisms PowerPoint presentation and BEAM Method presentation online .5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

**Due Thursday**

**11.04** Theoretical Response: Gender Criticisms. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in "Assignments." 3 hours

**Due Sunday**

**11.05** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**11.06** Read pdfs of assigned short stories in Blackboard. Take the Short Story Group Project Quiz due Sunday. You will rank your stories and critical lenses in the order that you would prefer to use for essay four. It's REALLY important that you complete this on time so I can assign you to a group. I will consider how early you submitted the quiz when I assign you your short story/lens. *25 points*

**11.07** Read *Critical Worlds* Part Nine: Ecocriticism (all chapters) before Tuesday's class

## **Week Twelve November 4-10: Nature (Ecocriticism); Introduction to Final Group**

## Project

In Week Twelve, I will make group project assignments by Tuesday. I will introduce the group project and your final essay in class. We will finish up our exploration of critical lenses with ecocriticism. Finally, we will submit Essay Three for peer review.

*Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

### **Due Tuesday before class\***

**12.01** Read *Critical Worlds* Part Nine: Ecocriticism (all chapters)

**12.02** Attend class Tuesday or review the Ecocriticism PowerPoint presentation online. Review the group project presentation and instructions online. 2 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

### **Due Thursday**

**12.03** Theoretical Response: Ecocriticism. Please follow the instructions for theoretical responses posted in "Assignments." 3 hours

### **Due Sunday**

**12.04** (Online students only): Students who are attending online must also comment on two classmates' posts, choosing classmates who wrote about a different text than the one you chose for your response. 1 hour

**12.05** Submit Essay Three Article Analysis Essay Draft for peer reviews

**12.06** Contact your group members, choose your group roles, and submit group project proposal to your group's forum.

## Week Thirteen November 11-17: Reading & Locating Literary Criticism

In Week Thirteen, our Arts and Humanities librarian will visit the class to guide us through locating scholarship in JSTOR. We will continue to work on the group project, starting with the annotated bibliography. Finally, we will complete peer review and submit Essay Three: Article Analysis.

### **Due Tuesday before class\***

**13.01** Annotate your assigned short story and brainstorm possible topics for your final essay.

**13.02** Attend class Tuesday or review watch the recording of our librarian showing you how to locate sources in JSTOR online. 5 hours

*\*Online students should complete this work by Thursday 11:59 p.m.*

### **Due Thursday**

**13.03** Essay Three Article Analysis Peer Reviews Due 30 points

**13.04** Start looking for articles for your group annotated bibliography by using our Ask Our Librarian discussion board.

**We have a non-graded “Ask Our Librarian” discussion board beginning this week. Use this discussion board to get help with research for the Group Project or ask any other questions about library research and working with sources.**

### **Due Sunday**

**13.05 Essay #3 Article Analysis Due Sunday 100 points**

**13.06** Make sure your group has established internal deadlines for annotated bibliography and rough drafts. From this point, your group will establish your own internal deadlines.

**13.07** Complete the end of course evaluation. If 70% of the class completes the end of course evaluation, I will give the entire class 5 extra credit points.

## **Weeks Fourteen-Sixteen November 18-December 13: Final Group Project (Your Group Deadlines)**

In the final weeks of the course, your schedule and due dates will be determined by your group. I will continue to work with project managers, and we will have our classroom available for individual and group work/meetings on Tuesdays. *Note: The average student will take 7.5 hours to complete each week's assignments*

## **Thanksgiving Break November 25-December 1: No Assignments\***

\*I do not expect you to work over the break; however, if you are behind on assignments, if your group has internal deadlines, or if you plan to revise and resubmit essays, this is a good time to work on things.

## **Due Friday, December 13 1:00 p.m.**

Project Managers must post the link to their group's chapter of our critical edition textbook no later than 1:00 p.m. on Friday, December 13.

**Due Friday, December 13 11:59 p.m.**

**16.01 Submit final draft of Essay #4 to Blackboard for grading** (100 points)

**16.02** Submit your course reflection letter (20 points)

**16.03** Submit your peer feedback form (15 points)

**16.04** Optional: Submit any revised essays (1-3) for regrading

*Your Fall 2024 final grades will be available on myCWI  
Friday, December 20.*

# Essay Assignment Prompts

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## English 211 Essay One

Final draft due Sunday Week Four

Our first essay will be a literary analysis on your choice of one of these three poems: Duy Doan's "Mother's Dirge," Larissa Lai's "SPLEEN 3: Supreme White" or Alison C. Rollins's "Object Permanence." Instructions for the essay, including required rough draft and peer review, are below.

### Technical details:

- 3-4 pages (at least three full pages), typed, double-spaced, Times New Roman font
- MLA format and citation style
- No outside sources required
- Essays will be submitted via Blackboard and need to be saved as Word files.

### Approach:

- A literary analysis is an argument. You will need to formulate a thesis about how you read the work that you

have chosen. This thesis should help readers approach the work with more understanding. This involves some sort of interpretation of the work's purpose or language choices or character motivation. I encourage you to email your thesis statement to me for feedback.

- Your thesis needs to be supported directly by the text. You'll have several examples from the poem that prove your thesis—most likely through direct quotation, but paraphrase and summary may be useful as well.
- Assume an audience that has read your poem but may not be overly familiar with it. Your essay shouldn't be merely summary, but you will need to remind readers of key parts of the text that support your argument.
- This essay does not need to apply any of the critical perspectives we study in Critical Worlds, but it will likely rely on strategies such as those used in New Criticism and/or Reader Response Criticism.

## **Grading:**

- The essay is worth 100 points.
- Key areas of assessment will be thesis, support, organization/structure, and language (including audience-appropriateness, overall tone, and grammar and mechanics). MLA formatting will also impact your grade.
- If you are unhappy with your grade on the essay, you will have the option to revise it for a better grade. That revision will be due Friday of Week 16

## **Peer Review:**

- You have a rough draft of this essay due to EduFlow for



peer review on Sunday of Week 3 (9/10).

- Your peer review is due on Thursday of Week 4 and is worth 25 points. You must submit a rough draft to EduFlow to participate in peer review. I will post additional instructions on how to use EduFlow.
- We will also be using MyEssayFeedback, a new artificial intelligence tool designed to provide targeted feedback on student essays. Using this tool for your rough draft is worth 5 points.

## English 211 Essay Two

Final draft due Sunday Week Nine

Our second literary analysis essay will be on Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. Details for the essay itself follow, including approach, due dates, grading, rough draft, and peer review.

### Technical Details:

- 5-6 pages (minimum of 5 full pages), typed, double-spaced, Times New Roman font.
- MLA format and citation style.
- No outside sources are required.
- Essays will be submitted via Blackboard and need to be saved as Word documents.

### Approach:

- You may use your reading responses to identify a potential topic and textual support for your essay. Focus on the

things that interested you and/or the questions that you asked.

- A literary analysis is an argument. You will need to formulate a thesis about how you read the novel. This thesis should, in some way, help readers approach the work with more understanding. Probably, this involves some sort of interpretation of the purpose/theme of the work or language choices or character motivation, etc.
- Your thesis needs to be supported directly by the text. You'll have several points that prove your thesis, and each of these points will need to use the text as support—most likely through direct quotation, but paraphrase and summary may be useful as well.
- Assume an audience who has read the book but may not be overly familiar with it. The essay shouldn't be plot summary, but you will need to remind readers of key parts of the text that support your argument. Please remember that summary is not analysis.
- This essay should apply one of the critical perspectives we are studying in Critical Worlds Please choose New Criticism, Reader Response Criticism (subjective or receptive), or Deconstruction. Use the terminology appropriate to the critical lens that you have chosen.

## **Grading:**

- The essay is worth 100 points.
- Key areas of assessment will be thesis, support, organization/structure, application of your selected critical theory, and language (including audience-appropriateness, overall tone, and grammar and mechanics). MLA formatting will also impact your grade.
- If you are unhappy with your grade on the essay, you will have the option to revise it for a better grade. That revision will be due Friday of Week 16.

## **Rough Draft and Peer Review:**

A rough draft of this essay is due to EduFlow on Sunday of Week 8. Complete your peer reviews by Thursday of Week 8. Peer Review is worth 25 points. We will also use MyEssayFeedback, an artificial intelligence tool, to provide targeted feedback.

## **English 211 Essay Three Article Analysis**

Final draft due Sunday Week 13

Our third essay is not a literary analysis but a summary, analysis, and response of and to an academic article on Adrienne Kennedy's one act play, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*. Details for the essay itself follow, followed by information on the rough draft and peer review.

### **Technical Details:**

- 4-5 pages (minimum of 4 full pages), typed, double-spaced, 12-pt. Times New Roman font
- MLA format and citation style
- You will need a Works Cited that includes the play, the article you choose for your analysis, and any other sources used.
- Essays will be submitted via Blackboard and need to be saved as Word files.

## Content:

This essay will have three parts: summary of the article, analysis of the article, and response to the article:

- **Summary:** Choose a peer-reviewed article of the play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* OR that focuses on Adrienne Kennedy as a playwright. Articles are available in the Essay Three Article folder. You will then introduce and summarize the article in 1-2 paragraphs. You should assume your reader has not read the article (though has read the play). Your focus should be on the thesis of the article and the main points that support that thesis. You are not trying to give a point-by-point summary but an overview, leading with the article's thesis.
- **Analysis:** You will then need to explain how the article works, using the information provided to you ("Evaluating Sources Rhetorically" and "Analyzing Rhetorical Use of Sources"). Explain the purpose, audience, authorship, bias, currency, relevance, and writing style of the article you have chosen. Also explain how the article uses sources according to the BEAM model. Does the author use all four methods (Background, Exhibits, Argument, and Method)? Does the author rely more heavily on certain methods? Why do you think that is? Be sure to back up your assertions with evidence from the article. You should look at the student example essay on *The Seagull* to see how this essay works.
- **Response:** Finally, you will respond to the thesis of the article by agreeing or disagreeing with the author (or doing a mixture of both), using your own interpretation of the play to back up your response. While it will be delayed, your essay will include a kind of thesis as the response.

This essay may have a different structure than you are used to. The summary should not exceed one page, and the analysis and response portions should be approximately balanced (if one section is two pages, the other should be a similar length—there shouldn't be one paragraph of analysis and three pages of response). It may help to use subheadings for each section and think of each part as a kind of mini-essay, or you may find a way to fit each part into a more traditional essay structure.

## **Grading:**

- The essay is worth 100 points.
- Key areas of assessment will be focused on the three parts:  
(1) Is the summary brief but thorough? (2) Does the analysis follow the guidelines provided and include appropriate references to the article to back up assertions? (3) Is the response thorough and well-supported by evidence from the play? Additionally, paragraphing, language use, format, and mechanics will be considered.
- Please follow the required format for this essay (Summary, Rhetorical Analysis, Response—see student example)
- If you are unhappy with your grade on the essay, you will have the option to revise it for a better grade. That revision will be due Friday of Week 16.

## **Rough Draft and Peer Review:**

- You have a rough draft of this essay due to EduFlow for peer review Sunday of Week 12.
- Peer Review: Peer review is worth 25 points and is due

Thursday of Week 13.

- We will also use MyEssayFeedback to provide artificial intelligence feedback.

# Group Project Details

## English 211 Final Project

Due Friday, December 15 1:00 p.m.

Your final project for the semester will be a involve working with a group to improve, edit, and revise our class publication, the Open Education Resource Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition here. There are three parts to each part of the critical edition—individual critical paper, group-produced annotated bibliography, and critical introduction. You will also rank your peers on their participation in this project and complete a brief reflective writing assignment about the project. This handout outlines the point breakdown for each of these pieces as well as details for each.

## Breakdown of Tasks and Due Dates



Task		Points	Due	Notes
Annotated bibliography	Group	50	Your group should set internal deadlines	Submit to Project Manager and Blackboard Group Project Discussion
1500-2000-word literary analysis essay supported with sources	Indiv	100	Internal group deadline to meet publication deadline of Friday, December 15 at 1:00 p.m.;  Blackboard by Friday, December 15	Submit to Project Manager for publication by group's internal deadline AND to Instructor as Signature Assignment, must submit to portfolio AND Bb by Friday, December 15
Pressbooks Critical Edition	Group	100	Sunday, November 12 (project proposal)  Friday, December 15 (final publication)	Note: Your Project Manager should submit a project proposal with your group roles to your group's Blackboard Discussion.  Your instructor will grade the group critical edition from the class Pressbooks publication. All submissions must be included by the 12/15 1:00 p.m. deadline.
Peer Ranking Form	Indiv	25	Friday, December 15	Submit only to Instructor, not to group

Reflection on Your Learning Journey	Indiv	25	Friday, December 15	Submit only to Instructor in Bb (Note: You may also want to submit this to your English or liberal arts portfolio)
TOTAL		300		This project is worth 30% of your overall course grade

## Individual Critical Analysis Essay (100 points)

You will be assigned a short story and critical lens based on your responses to the short story quiz due Sunday, November 5.

### Technical details:

- 4-6 pages (1500-2000 words), typed, double-spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt font
- MLA format and citation style
- At least two outside sources, one of which is a scholarly journal like the article we worked with for Essay Three
- Essays will be submitted to Blackboard, your major's Portfolio, and to the Project Manager for inclusion in the group critical edition website.
- Use of generative AI is allowed but must be cited and acknowledged, including links to chats and/or screenshots. Here's more information on how to do this:

<https://idaho.pressbooks.pub/write/chapter/citing-generative-ai-in-academic-work/>

## Subject matter:

- Essays must cover the short story chosen by your group
- Essays must use one of the theoretical lenses we've covered in class as a critical approach to the work you have chosen. Each student will be assigned a different lens.
- You will "apply" for the short story and lens you prefer in the Short Story quiz due Sunday, November 5.

## Approach:

- You will need to formulate a thesis about how you read the work you have chosen. This thesis should be appropriate to the theoretical lens you've chosen. Your essay should also get at the significance of whatever interpretation you're making.
- Your thesis needs to be supported directly by the text. You'll have several points that prove your thesis, and each of these points will need to use the text as backup—most likely through direct quotation, but paraphrase and summary may be useful as well.
- Assume an audience that has just read your piece and wants to examine it from a new angle. The essay shouldn't be plot summary, but it will need to remind readers of key parts of the text that support your argument.

## Grading:

- The essay is worth 100 points.
- Key areas of assessment will be thesis, support, application of critical approach, organization/structure, and language (including audience-appropriateness, overall tone, and grammar and mechanics). MLA formatting will also impact your grade.
- Peer review for this essay will be conducted within your group (not on EduFlow). Your group will decide how to do this. If you would like me to create a MyEssayFeedback assignment for comprehensive review, please let me know.

## Annotated Bibliography (50 points)

Your group will jointly contribute to an annotated bibliography for the short stor(ies) you are assigned to work with. The audience is someone who has read the work (likely other students) and wants to know more. Your annotations should give readers an idea of whether they would like to read the secondary source in more detail.

## Technical Details:

- Your group will need to have 3 annotated secondary sources per person (a group of 3 would have 9 annotated entries; a group of 4 would have 12). These must be unique entries—not duplicate articles.
- Annotations should be about 200-500 words (1-2 paragraphs) each. They must include an MLA-formatted citation for the work. They must also include a summary of

the text, focusing on thesis and main supporting arguments/details. Finally, annotations should identify how a reader might use the text (is it a straightforward literary analysis? Does it apply a particular critical approach? Does it provide biography on the author? Does it give historical context in some way?). You can see an example of an annotated bibliography here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/03/>.

- Acceptable texts for annotation:
  - Peer-reviewed literary analysis articles (generally on the specific text, but author-focused pieces are fine too)
  - Books and book chapters—university presses are usually most authoritative; these may be on the specific text or author-focused
  - “Theory” pieces such as those in “Further Reading” in *Critical Worlds* (note that there should be no more than one of these per person in your group)
  - Peer-reviewed articles that cover historical contexts for your piece
  - Primary source material from the author’s and/or text’s time period for use in a New Historicist reading (no more than one of these per person in your group)
  - Texts that do not fall into one of these categories (websites, blogs, newspaper articles, magazine articles) must be approved by me ahead of time. There are quality pieces in these media, but they are few and far between.

## Recommendations on Process:

- Locate potential sources (aim for more than you need—say 4-5) as soon as possible. If the library doesn’t

have something in their collection, there will be time to acquire it or order it through interlibrary loan (which can take hours, days, or weeks).

- Read your sources with an eye toward annotating. You should read articles in full, but you may skim parts. You will likely read only sections of books to get a feel for them.
- Draft annotations individually; share and workshop as a group. You don't need to aim for a single voice, but you will want to ensure everyone's work is of consistent quality.
- If you think a source might be used in your individual essay, be sure to claim it and work with it early.
- Use the Blackboard Discussion Forum assigned to your group to create and edit these annotations.
- Your annotated bibliography editor should also look over the existing annotated bibliography entries for your assigned short story and should make any necessary corrections.

## Formatted Critical Edition (100 points)

Your group will publish your work to a critical edition class publication in Pressbooks. This book will be available publicly and will count as a publication credit for your resume. You will need to license your work using Creative Commons. I will explain how to do this. Your group's editor will complete your part of the class critical edition by our last day of class, when we will celebrate with a "book launch."

## Technical Details:

- Project Proposal: by Sunday, November 12, your group's chosen project manager should post a project proposal to

the group's forum, detailing the roles that your group has chosen for each member.

- **About Us:** Please follow the existing conventions for this section of the book (include new contributors in the same style as previous contributors)
- **Critical Introduction:** A brief co-written piece that introduces the work, gives an overview of the history of criticism around the work and/or puts the work into a historical context, and briefly summarizes each individual essay (one paragraph per essay). I recommend that you individually draft these and that the editor compiles them in the critical introduction. The editor will add the new paragraphs to the critical introduction and also edit/revise the introduction.
- **Annotated Bibliography:** Include the group-produced annotated bibliography after the individual essays as a separate chapter.
- **Individual Essays:** Subtitle each essay's page using the type of criticism (e.g. "Reader Response," "Psychological," etc.)
- Follow the publication's existing format for your articles.

Everyone in the group will earn up to 100 points for submitting this project correctly and on time. Late Final Projects will not be accepted.

## Project Management Roles

To complete this assignment correctly and completely, I recommend that you use project management techniques to organize the task. Suggested team member roles include:

- **Project Manager:** Responsible for submitting proposal, collecting all articles and ensuring they meet the

minimum requirements, enforcing deadlines, and communicating with the team and the instructor. Collects “About Us” information (the copy editor can also do this if you have five members).

- **Annotated Bibliography Editor:** Responsible for collecting and creating the final annotated bibliography from group member contributions. Edits existing entries from previous groups.
- **Editor:** Responsible for compiling article summaries into a critical introduction, revising the introduction and conclusion to that introduction, and proofreading your group’s final publication.
- **Publisher:** works with me in Pressbooks to produce the critical edition (this role does not require WordPress experience, but this will be helpful), adhering to existing publication style guidelines. The publisher may also include images that enhance your group’s work.
- **Copy Editor** (for groups of 5): If your group has 5 members, you may assign an additional copy editor role. This person will collect the “About Us” information and will be responsible for the final proofreading of the publication.

Your project manager will submit a project proposal to me on your group’s Blackboard discussion forum by the deadline, which identifies the roles you have each chosen for this project. If you have only three members in your group, you will need to divide the responsibilities of the annotated bibliography editor role.

## Peer Ranking Form (25 points)

This brief assignment will ask you about your participation and experience in the group project. As part of this assessment, I will ask you to assign yourself and your fellow group members



the grade you think that you/they deserve for their effort on the project.

*Note: If, on average, your group does not rate your individual participation at a C or higher, you will not earn points for this assignment.*

## Short Reflective Letter (25 points)

You will individually and privately submit a short reflective letter to Blackboard that discusses your experiences in the course, especially with the final project. This doesn't need to be long—a page or two is sufficient.

Remember that this reflection letter is not a course or instructor evaluation. I encourage you to complete the course evaluation to give feedback on the class and my teaching. However, this assignment is about your progress over the semester, especially as evidenced in the final project. This is also not the place to complain about your group—please speak with me if you're struggling on that front.

I welcome feedback about things that still don't make sense or assignments that were useful in helping you understand course content, but the focus should be on what you did and didn't learn, what you did and didn't expect, and how/if you see this class affecting your future work (whether in English, other college courses, work, life, etc.).

[https://onedrive.live.com/  
embed?resid=B388DE5B0BCACA69%2134218&authkey=!AE7k  
wUDCQs0T-g8&em=2](https://onedrive.live.com/embed?resid=B388DE5B0BCACA69%2134218&authkey=!AE7kwUDCQs0T-g8&em=2)

# Links to ChatGPT Chats Used in Writing This Book

Here are links to the chats I used to assist with writing this textbook. I have included the prompts (some of which almost read like found poetry).

## New Criticism

New Criticism (Main Thread)

Prompts

1. I am writing an introduction to literary analysis for college students. Please give me an outline for a chapter on New Criticism. The chapter should include the following: an overview of New Criticism as a critical theory; names of influential New Critics; a primary text that is in the public domain that can be used to practice New Criticism; a list of terms for students to use when analyzing a text using New Criticism as their method; a checklist for practicing New Criticism, and a list of web-based resources where students can learn more about New Criticism.
2. Discuss how New Criticism emerged as a response to previous critical theories that relied on external factors.
3. Please write a one paragraph biography of John Crowe Ransom
4. Write a one paragraph biography of Cleanth Brooks
5. Write a one paragraph biography of Robert Penn Warren

6. Provide a list of web-based resources that students can use to learn more about New Criticism. This could include articles, videos, podcasts, and other resources that explain the theory and provide examples of its application.
7. What are some drawbacks of New Criticism when analyzing literature?
8. What is the importance of New Criticism in Literary Analysis?
9. Write a five-paragraph essay using New Criticism as a critical method to analyze John Donne's "The Canonization"
10. Provide a list of ten peer-reviewed articles that use New Criticism as a critical method
11. These are not real articles. Can you provide any articles with links to websites?
12. These are also not real articles.
13. Write a one paragraph biography of I.A. Richards
14. What does unity mean in New Criticism?
15. what is complexity in New Criticism?
16. what does paradox mean in New Criticism?
17. How is irony interpreted by New Critics?
18. what is the role of tension and ambiguity in a text?
19. How do scholars do Close Reading?

## Poem Questions

### Prompts

1. You are an English instructor. You want to provide a set of questions for students to ask about "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" using the critical method of New Criticism to analyze the text. Please provide 5-6 questions students can use.
2. Provide a set of questions using New Criticism as a critical approach to analyze "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" King James Version

3. Provide a set of questions using New Criticism as a critical approach to analyze “Recuerdo” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

## Ars Poetica

### Prompts

1. Write a brief literary analysis of Archibald MacLeish’s poem “Ars Poetica”
2. Imagine that you are an English professor at a community college. Write an assignment prompt for students to analyze Archibald MacLeish’s poem “Ars Poetica.” Include detailed instructions for elements of literary analysis that they should include, such as form, meter, genre, rhyme, etc.

## Reader Response

### Reader Response (Main Thread)

#### Prompts:

1. I am writing an introduction to literary analysis for college students. Please give me an outline for a chapter on Reader Response Theory. The chapter should include the following: an overview of Reader Response as a critical theory; names of influential Reader Response scholars; a primary text that is in the public domain that can be used to practice Reader Response; a list of terms for students to use when analyzing a text using Reader Response as their method; a checklist for practicing Reader Response, and a list of web-based resources where students can learn more about Reader Response.
2. Write a one-paragraph biography of Wolfgang Iser.
3. Write a one paragraph biography of Louise Rosenblatt

4. Write a one paragraph biography of Stanley Fish
5. Write a one paragraph biography of Norman Holland
6. What is subjective reader response
7. How do you do subjective reader response?
8. What is the implied reader
9. What is receptive reader response
10. What is anticipation in reader response theory
11. what role does empathy play in reader response
12. Provide a list of web-based resources where students can learn more about Reader Response theory, including academic articles, online forums, and video lectures.
13. Write a 5-paragraph essay on John Donne's "The Canonization" using Reader Response Theory
14. Please come up with five questions using reader response theory to analyze the following poem: What an Indian Thought When He Saw a Comet By Tso-le-oh-woh
15. Using the same poem, come up with five questions using a receptive reader response approach
16. come up with five questions that consider how different audiences from that time period might have experienced this poem.
17. Write an example of a thesis statement for an essay exploring how indigenous communities would understand this poem
18. Please provide an example thesis statement for a subjective reader response to the poem from a 21st century college student
19. What are some limitations of reader response theory when analyzing literature?
20. Come up with a title for a reader response essay about John Donne's "The Canonization"
21. You are a nineteen year old male college student. Your parents do not like your girlfriend and they want you to break up with her because they think that you're too good for her. But you adore your girlfriend and want to be with

her forever. You think the love that you two share is truly special and extraordinary. Your girlfriend is brilliant, witty, and talented. She has long black hair and is one of the most beautiful people you have ever met. You have been asked to write a short subjective reader response essay to John Donne's poem "The Canonization" using your own experiences with love and romance to help you understand and analyze the poem. Please write this essay and include some comparisons to your personal experiences with your girlfriend. Make an argument based on the poem that parents should not interfere with their children's romantic relationships.

22. Write a short receptive reader response to John Donne's poem "The Canonization." Include a description of the implied reader for this poem and how the poem meets or fails to meet that reader's expectations. What effect would the poem have on the implied reader? Also include a thesis statement that makes an argument about the poem.
23. Please create a title for this essay
24. Here is a 1619 poem by Michael Drayton called "Since there's no help." Please read the poem and come up with five questions using reader response theory that students could use to approach the text. (TEXT OF POEM)

## Deconstruction

Deconstruction (Main Thread)

Prompts:

1. Can you help me to understand how to do a close reading of a text using deconstruction as my critical method?
2. This is a short story by Donald Barthelme called "The Glass

Mountain.” Can you please look at the story for elements that could be analyzed using deconstruction as a method? (TEXT OF STORY)

3. What are the limits of deconstruction as a critical approach to literature?
4. Write a short essay on John Donne’s poem “The Canonization” using deconstruction as your critical method. Include terms like difference and binary in your essay.
5. Please come up with a playful title for this essay

#### “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

Prompt: Please read the following poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes. Imagine that you are a student who is trying to analyze this poem using deconstruction as your critical method. What are five questions you could ask about the poem that would help the student to formulate a deconstructive analysis of the poem? (TEXT OF “THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS”)

#### Death be Not Proud

Prompt: You are a student in an introduction to literary analysis college class. Write a short deconstructive analysis of John Donne’s Holy Sonnet “Death, Be Not Proud.” Identify the binary oppositions in the text (copied below). State the text’s preferred meaning, then show how the oppositions actually undercut that meaning. Explain how the poem subverts the genre of the sonnet, which is traditionally identified with love poetry. Show how while the poem’s theme seems defiant, the underlying current is actually the opposite: fear of mortality. Here is the poem’s text:

# New Historicism

New Historicism

Prompts:

1. What is New Historical Criticism?
2. What is New Historicism, also known as Cultural Materialism, and how is it applied to literary texts?
3. What are steps that literature students can take when they use a new historicism approach for a literary text? What elements do they need to consider?
4. What are some limitations of a new historicism approach to literary texts?
5. You are a student in an introduction to literary analysis class. Write a short essay on John Donne's "The Canonization" using a new historicism approach to the text. Emphasize both the biographical details of Donne's life that are reflected in the poem and the cultural context (17th century England) for this poem. Make sure you include a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph that makes an argument about the poem using new historicism as your critical method. Also include a title for your essay that reflects the contents of your paper. Here is the text of the poem: (TEXT OF THE CANONIZATION)

# Marxist, Postcolonial, Critical Race Theory, and Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies

Prompt: what is cultural studies literary criticism?

Marxist (Main Chat Thread)



Prompts:

1. You are an instructor in a college literature class. Please read the story "A Cup of Tea" by Katherine Mansfield, which I will copy and paste below. Then use a Marxist critical lens to create five questions that students can answer about the text. Here is the short story: (TEXT OF "A CUP OF TEA")
2. Thank you! Please use the same story but change your analytical lens to postcolonial criticism. To create five questions for students, consider Katherine Mansfield's biography. She was from a prominent New Zealand family and had a relationship with a Maori woman when she was in her twenties.
3. Please provide a third set of five questions using cultural studies as your critical framework. Consider both the text and the culture in which Mansfield set the story: 1920s London, with a wealthy woman who does not need to work as the main character.
4. This was great, but I'd love to see something about popular culture among these questions. Can you revise to include that term as well?
5. Could you write a thesis statement making an argument about the short story using cultural studies as your critical framework?
6. What are some of the limitations of Marxist, Postcolonial, and Cultural Studies criticism for literary texts?
7. Imagine you are a student in an introductory college literary analysis course. Please write a brief 4-5 paragraph essay using John Donne's poem "The Canonization" and taking a Marxist critical approach to the text. Include a title that reflects the Marxist approach as well as a thesis statement that makes an argument about power and socioeconomic status in this text. Here is the poem: (TEXT OF THE CANONIZATION)
8. What are some limitations of Critical Race Theory as an

- approach to literary texts? (twice)
9. Can you simplify this for me into three main points?

## Psychological

### Psychological Criticism (Main Thread)

Prompts:

1. What are the steps students can take to apply psychological criticism to a text?
2. Please read the poem "A narrow fellow in the grass" by Emily Dickinson. Use Freudian psychoanalytical concepts such as repression, desire, id, and penis envy to formulate five questions that could help students to understand the poem using psychoanalytic theory. Here is the text of the poem: (POEM TEXT)
3. Can you write a thesis statement that makes an argument about this poem using Freud's psychoanalytic approach?
4. What are some limitations of psychological criticism for literary texts?
5. Please read "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost. Then apply Carl Jung's theory of archetypes to develop five questions that college students in an English literature course can use to analyze the poem. Here is the poem: (POEM TEXT)
6. Can you create a short checklist of steps students should take when practicing psychological criticism in analyzing literary texts? The first step needs to be choosing a theoretical approach (such as Jung, Freud, etc.)

### Model AI Essay

Prompts:

1. Write an essay about John Donne's "The Canonization" using

Freudian analysis as a critical method

2. Please provide a title for this essay

## Gender Criticism

Gender Criticism (MAIN THREAD)

Prompts:

1. You are a helpful and interesting college English instructor teaching a literary analysis class. Write a short one paragraph summary of feminist literary criticism for an introductory textbook on literary criticism.
2. Thanks! Please do the same thing (one paragraph summary) for post-feminist criticism.
3. Please do the same thing (one paragraph summary) for Queer Theory.
4. Great! Can you provide a list of five approaches students can take when they use feminist criticism to analyze a literary text?
5. That's great! Please do the same thing for post-feminist criticism.
6. Please do the same thing for Queer Theory.
7. What are some limitations of feminist theory as an approach to a literary text? Please provide a short answer (3-4 limitations).
8. Please do the same thing for post-feminist criticism. What are some limitations?
9. Please do the same thing for Queer Theory.
10. Thank you! I would like you to provide a short (4-5 paragraph) model essay for students that demonstrates how to use feminist criticism when analyzing a poem. I will share the poem's text with you. It is "The Canonization" by English poet John Donne. Please include terminology that

feminist critics would use such as feminism, patriarchy, misogyny, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, internalized sexism, stereotypes, sex, gender, etc. Consider the role of women in 17th century England as part of your analysis.

(TEXT OF THE POEM)

11. Please come up with a clever title for this essay.
12. Please do the same thing for post-feminist criticism. Include terms such as deconstruction, gender, binary, stereotype, discourse, politics, and representation. Also provide a title for the essay.
13. Please write a 4-5 paragraph essay about John Donne's "The Canonization" using post-feminist criticism. Include terms such as deconstruction, gender, binary, stereotype, discourse, politics, and representation. Also provide a title for the essay.
14. Thank you. Please write a 4-5 paragraph essay about John Donne's poem "The Canonization" using Queer Theory. Include terms such as heteronormativity, binary, cisgender, transgression, privileged, discourse, marginalization, social construct, and intersectionality. Also provide a title for the essay.
15. Who are some prominent feminist literary scholars?
16. Who are some prominent postfeminist literary scholars?
17. Who are some important Queer Theory literary scholars?

## Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism Thread (ChatGPT 4)

1. I am writing a chapter on ecocriticism for an introduction to literary analysis textbook. Can you

please suggest 5-6 literary elements that a scholar should consider when using ecocriticism as a critical method for analyzing literary texts?

2. What about the importance of place in literature? How would ecocriticism address this?
3. What are some limitations of ecocriticism as a methodology for analyzing literature?
4. Who are some prominent ecocriticism scholars?
5. You are a student in an introduction to literary analysis course. You have been asked to write a short essay on John Donne's poem "The Canonization" using ecocriticism as your critical approach. Please include a title for the essay and include a thesis statement that uses ecocriticism to argue something about the poem's meaning. You may want to consider the circumstances of Donne's life in 16th century England. Here is the text of the poem: (Canonization)
6. The outline is good, but I would like you to write an actual short essay. I am a teacher using this essay as a model for students in my course.
7. Can you help me come up with a short checklist that students can use when they are applying ecocriticism to a literary text?
8. I want students to read a short passage from the 2021 novel "Klara and the Sun" by Kazuo Ishiguro and use ecocriticism to analyze it. Are you familiar with this novel?
9. Thank you. Here is a short passage from the novel. In this passage, Klara and Rosa have a turn in the store window. Can you please think of five questions students could use to guide their ecocriticism analysis of this passage? (passage from Guardian excerpt of the novel)

10. Another text I would like students to analyze using an ecocriticism lens is “Song of Wandering Aedh” by Yeats. Can you help me to come up with five questions students could use to analyze this poem? Here is the text: (poem)
11. I also want my students to use ecocriticism to analyze Amy Lowell’s poem “The Peddler of Flowers.” Can you come up with five questions to guide them? Here is the poem: (poem)