**New Criticism (Formalism/Structuralism)**

The first critical theory we will examine is called Formalism or Structuralism (known as New Criticism today). Actually, this theory is well known to students because it dominated the study of literature from the 1930s to the 1970s. For many of you, this was the method taught to you as soon as you began to read.

**What is the New Criticism Method?**

As its earlier names suggest, New Criticism explores the formal elements and structures in literature: genre conventions, character, plot structure, conflict, images, symbols, themes etc. New Critics feel literary texts have their own type of knowledge, and to understand that knowledge, readers must explore the relationships and connections between a work's many structures. By examining the structures together, New Critics argue, one can uncover the "intended meaning(s)" of a text.

**What Questions do New Critics Ask? What do they Do?**

- Who are the protagonist and antagonist? How are they characterized?
- What is the conflict?
- What themes does the work include?
- How are symbols, images and other poetic devices used?
- What role does setting play in the work?
- Trace the plot structure (rising action, climax, resolution etc.)
- Examine how genre forms affect the content, (i.e. how does the short story form/structure affect how the work is written, or how details are arranged)

New Critics read a text many times in order to answer these questions. Then, the critics try to find connections between the many structures. For example, they may look how setting affects character development, how imagery and metaphor describe the conflict, or how the antagonist drives the plot. These, of course, are just a few of the possible connections in a text.

**What New Critics Believe**

New critics believe that the text is the only authority, meaning that what the author intended is not as important as how the many structures work together to create meaning.
They believe that as one rereads a work, one begins to see connections and to grasp the way large and small elements of a work relate to each other.

New Critics believe the knowledge of atext is important to all people, so they tend to look for issues (themes) of universal significance, such as relationships, love, aging, death and dying, faith, doubt, fear etc.

**The Strengths of New Criticism**

Repetitive close readings make us better readers and make our experiences with texts richer. Because it deals with traditional literary conventions, it is easily taught and not theory heavy. Its insistence on close reading of "the words on the page" allows us to read without letting our personal emotions or beliefs affect the interpretation.

**Concerns with New Criticism**

It does not explore authorial intent or historical, social and political conditions surrounding the work. It does not allow much space for many different interpretations. New popular culture works often don’t work well with New Criticism because these new works rarely feature many of the traditional literary structures.

**(Neo) Marxist Criticism**

**What is Marxism?**
Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a theorist and historian whose influential economic and social theories had a major impact across the world and throughout much of the 20th Century. Unfortunately, history has not been clear on Marx. Even though his ideas were highly valued by academics and artists across Europe and North America, the way his ideas were used by politicians (Mao and Lenin for example) turned the term "Marxist" into a "dirty word." Marx’s writings were in response to social hardships (poverty, starvation, unemployment, etc.) stemming from the rise of capitalism. Appropriately, his theories analyze how societies function politically, socially and economically.

**What is Marist Literary Criticism?**
According to Marxist scholars, literature reflects the social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. In simple terms, texts reflect the values, beliefs and social roles of the culture that produced the text. And, in turn, the text itself helps to continue the values, beliefs and social roles of the culture. In a capitalist society, Marxist
critics argue, texts reflect class struggle and materialism. The Marxist critic, then, carefully reads a text and examines issues of power and money.

**What do Marxists Literary Critics Do? What questions do they ask?**

- What kinds of power (social, economic, sexual, physical, etc.) are evident in the text? What is the social order?
- Who has power in the text? How do they maintain and/or gain power?
- How do power relationships operate in the text? Who gains and loses in the relationships?
- What, if anything, causes power to change hands?
- What ideologies (values, beliefs, social roles) are evident in the text?
- Do characters recognize the oppressive social order/ideologies?
- How do characters challenge the social order/ideologies?
- In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo (keep society the same); or does it try to undermine it?
- What does the work say about oppression; or are social conflicts ignored or blamed on others?
- What social/economic forces affect the author's writing?

**Strengths:** Marxist criticism is useful for most texts, as all texts are a product of their social, political and economic environments. Also, this approach appeals to a broad spectrum of people and is very good at exploring political and personal relationships.

**Drawbacks:** Marxist criticism’s focus on power can politicize texts, causing one to overlook the aesthetics of a work.