Critical theory presents multiple ways of interpreting and writing about texts. The variety of approaches available to writers can be applied to themes within a text, the context in which a text is written, or the impact a text has on academic communities. Listed below are brief summaries of a few critical theories that can be used to focus your critical reading, research, and essay writing.

**DECONSTRUCTION**
Most often linked with Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction “shows that a text...can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying” (Cuddon 223). It assumes that signs (a concept and a sound-image; see Ferdinand de Saussure) have multiple meanings and can take on meanings beyond the control or intent of the author. In other words, there is no guaranteed, stable, or essential meaning. Deconstruction is not the same as destruction. Deconstruction examines a text in order to reveal its underlying values and assumptions, and the various signs and signifiers represented in it may have multiple and contradictory meanings.

**FEMINIST CRITICISM**
Feminist theory questions power, privilege, and gender-bias. It is concerned with the difficulties of women writing, being represented accurately, and being treated with equality in a traditionally patriarchal canon. Its origins are linked with the women’s rights movements in the 18th century, and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is considered a foundational text. Later authors (such as Susan B. Anthony, Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Jennifer Baumgardner, and Amy Richards) furthered these initial ideas by questioning socio-economic/political status of women, male/female power dynamics, race/class issues, and phallocentric ideologies. Anglo-American scholars tend to be more concerned with thematic studies by and about women, whereas French critics are more concerned with the role gender may play in writing. See first-wave, second-wave, and third-wave feminism.

**FORMALISM**
Formalist critics do not consider a text in its social, historical, or biographical context. Instead, they conduct a close reading or analysis, as the work itself is seen as a self-contained entity. A formalist stance would consider formal features such as style, structure, imagery, tone, and genre to determine meaning. For more information, see Russian Formalism and New Criticism.

**GENDER STUDIES**
The Gender Studies lens is closely linked to a feminist critique but broadens the scope, taking into account gay, lesbian, and queer studies. Rooted in the notion that gender inequality is sustained by cultural mores, theorists examine sexuality, race, and ethnicity. More pertinent, however, is the interrogation of the “established” binary of feminine and masculine. Gender Studies questions the relation between gender, physiology, and sexuality and forwards that these concepts are contingent and constructed. See Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva.

**MARXIST CRITICISM**
Marxism is a discourse “primarily concerned with economic, political and philosophical issues” and explains “capitalist theory and mode production” (Cuddon 527). A literary work is first viewed as a product of work (and hence in the realm of production and consumption we call economics). In addition, it may be looked upon as a work that does identifiable work of its own. That work usually enforces and reinforces the prevailing ideology: that is, the network of conventions, values, and opinions to which the majority of people uncritically subscribe.
CRITICAL THEORY

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY
Characterized as a grand historical undertaking, Postcolonialism aims to study the discourse and literature of imperialism. When European countries developed navies nearly 600 years ago, they sought to conquer the indigenous cultures from India to Africa to America, and the natural resources therein, which paved the way for the centralized Euro-American wealth and globalization that we experience today. More so than the historical accounts themselves, Postcolonial theory seeks to investigate the effects and transmutations of the oppressed cultures that managed to survive such conquests. A few notable theorists are Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha who have examined the main concepts of the field, including diaspora, hybridity, ambiguity, mimicry, mestizaje, and creolization.

PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM
Founded on the theories of Sigmund Freud, this model “is concerned with the quest for and discovery of connections between the artists themselves and what they actually create” (Cuddon 356). This extends to a speculation that many literary heroes are similar because of the Oedipal complex. Psychoanalytic criticism, in later generations, analyzes the characters in novels and plays before proceeding to their authors; these characters can be broken down to projections of various repressed aspects of the author’s psyche. This view can give the writer an access point to the motivations and structure of the author’s mind through his/her story or characters.

READER-RESPONSE THEORY
This theory favors the reader’s active, collaborative, and reciprocal relationship with a text. Specifically, this theory claims that the reader plays an active role in constructing meaning(s). This is a departure from other theories, such as New Criticism, that favor the inherent power of the text. Reader-response theorists assert that a work has “no real existence until it is read. Its meaning is in potential” (Cuddon 770). The meaning is the sum of readers’ reactions, interpretations, and translations.

Summaries of these theories were derived from:


