Glossary of Literary Theories

Neo-Classicism

Values

* re-working of traditional forms and subjects with accuracy and technical skill.
* rules of composition and metre are meticulously followed
* technical control of form and language
* grace and decorum in expression and urbanity in wit

Classroom example

• Students writing formally correct haiku or sonnets after studying some which are technically expert and graceful

Romanticism

Values

 deification of the imagination, with the poet as imagination's prophet
 humble and rustic country life as subject
 expression of poet's emotional states
 glorifying the creative individual
 the creative individual being alienated from society, yet able to save it
 not being bound by convention or rationality
 flexibility and lack of boundaries
 increasing freedom of choice

Classroom examples

• study and writing of confessional poetry as embodiment of the individual psyche
• creative writing tasks without boundaries in content or techniques

Realism (or Expressive Realism)

Values

 work which is life-like, or true to life in a way which penetrates the surface and reveals underlying driving forces
 lucidity and objectivity rather than rhetoric or personal viewpoints
 the unpacking of psychological motivations and socio-political factors which influence characters' actions
Classroom examples

• students producing reports of jointly observed phenomena, attempting verisimilitude and clarity, and aiming for objectivity

• studying/writing character sketches showing effects of social circumstances interacting with psychological factors

**Naturalism**

Values

- the principles of scientific determinism, of humans being compelled to certain acts and beliefs by their biological and social circumstances
- depiction of life as an animalistic struggle against overpowering forces, structures and drives
- the lives of individuals in grinding poverty, often in overcrowded cities
- civilization as decaying rather than developing
- a focus on narcissism, disorder and the cult of the erotic.

Classroom examples

• studying/writing character sketches with a sense of inner compulsion of characters because of their social situation

• exploring texts about the urban poverty trap and its effect on victims and the social structures maintaining it

**Symbolism**

Values

• shifting states of emotion, reverie, daydream and even delirium

• evocation of human consciousness, mood and sensations through patterns of images which build up to a cumulative effect

• using symbols with a private, idiosyncratic significance

• aesthetic and musical features of composition (may have spiritual significance)

Classroom example

• students map the use of particular symbols throughout a densely symbolic novel, to see if patterns emerge which have an impact on unfolding themes and characters, and to see if significance of a symbol alters in different parts of the work, or when applied to or used by different characters

**Biographical Criticism**

Values

- insights to be gained from study of the author's life and times, and stated intentions
- a focus on the effects of material and philosophical shifts during the author's life.
- using the insights of psychoanalysis to evaluate the possible effects of an author's life experiences on the presentation of family relationships and the expression or repression of desires.
Classroom examples

- students research the life and times of particular authors, linking biographical events to characteristics in the authors’ works

Psychoanalytical Criticism

Values

- focus on the unconscious which may appear in puzzling or distorted dreamlike bursts, showing what has been repressed or censored by the conscious mind
- exploring the multiple motivations affecting texts, seeing particular genres as defense mechanisms and the reader motivated by avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure
- literature as an illusion of escape from the divided self
- patterns in literature of pairs of archetypes or universally recognised symbols stored in the collective unconscious, such as water and fire, journeys and enclosed gardens

Classroom examples

- students research life experiences of particular authors, to see whether authors’ experience of childhood trauma is reflected in their literary depiction of characters’ lives
- mapping the use of archetypes such as journeys and enclosed gardens in novels and poetry, to see how they function as emblems of interior psychological states

Formalism

Values

- a practical scientific approach to the text as a material object
- focusing on intrinsic features of texts
- what linguistic and rhetorical structures and features of genres contribute to the meanings produced by a text
- reworking the available forms, aiming for technical artistry and sophistication
- exploring relationships between literary and structural devices

Classroom examples

- exploring defamiliarisation - how reader alertness is heightened by depicting something ordinary in such a way that it seems strange
- focus on word order, quirky, shifting narration, or an untruthful narrator
- exploring how writers reveal information gradually to control pace

Modernism

Values

- work which is disjointed and episodic, juxtaposing rather than ordering ideas
- an effect which is radically non-logical
- complexity, compression, levels of interacting ironies, virtuosity
- unresolvable paradox, deliberate elusiveness and instability of meaning
- self-consciously twisting traditional literary forms
- blunt use of the vernacular to critique polite culture
- cognitive rather than aesthetic factors, contributing to a dominantly "code-breaking" approach to the understanding of poetry

**Classroom examples**

- placing realist and modernist texts side by side to see where modernism attempts to break away from realistic depiction
- attempting to follow the lines of thought in some unresolvable paradoxes in texts, to explore the notion of deliberate elusiveness
- looking at use and purposes of slang in a text
- observing or practising textual disruptions - half-finished scenes, blank pages, extended dramatic irony

**Structuralism**

**Values**

- rhetorical, metaphorical and linguistic features of text as the structural axis around which a text is constructed and the source of literary unity
- meaning is determinable and determinative (fixed and correct)
- systematic, quasi-scientific analysis of the structures of a text to reveal its meaning, as grammar reveals the meaning of a sentence
- making structural parallels between literature, ideas and social groups
- a text-centred approach, focusing on particular literary works or on literary devices and conventions in general (as seen in Marxist and feminist criticism as developments of structuralist principles
- abandonment of all previous methods of textual analysis, seen as obsolete and untenable in the face of structuralism

**Classroom examples**

- searching in texts for the structural axis which may function as the key to their 'correct' interpretation

**Leavisian / Practical Criticism**

**Values**

- substantial study of great works as counterbalance to expansion of mass media
- all students, no matter what their backgrounds, being taught major works from a canon of literature highly valued over time
- both the literary tradition and contemporary creative writing being seen as influential
- literature and culture as forces for social cohesion and preservation of cultural heritage.
- works with moral and ethical substance, seriousness, social conscience, which explore the background reasons for life's most significant choices
- interpretation through close reading, not skewed by habits of expectation, and justifiable from the text (reading a text 'on its own merits')
- evaluation of literary quality and comparison of works' relative value as high-, middle- or low-brow

**Classroom examples**

- study of exemplary classic works, in order to reach a point of being able to evaluate their worth compared with many other works
- focus on literary works from diverse periods which contain ethical and philosophical reflection on the individual's role in community
• study of advertisements and newspaper opinion pieces to see how techniques of persuasion are brought used to affect people's values, attitudes and purchasing habits

• study of contemporary creative writing as a continuation and adaptation of 'the great tradition'

New Criticism

Values

- close 'scientific' evaluation and detailed textual analysis of individual texts, as autonomous entities worthy of close scrutiny
- unpacking ambiguity, irony and paradox as codes to be cracked
- balancing tensions and resolving ambiguities by symbol and metaphor, seeking coherence and integration
- formalist practice of close reading or practical criticism, firmly focused on how the text creates meaning
- every technical, metaphorical and aesthetic feature has a function, rather than being merely decorative
- poems as 'concrete universals,' examples of something permanently true
- rescuing texts from tyranny of authorial intent and readers' emotional responses

Classroom examples

- close textual analysis of complex works, painstakingly unpacking meaning from deliberate ambiguities
- analysis of poems which seeks to evaluate the effects of each stylistic device
- searching for universal themes in specific works

Poststructuralism

Values

- idea that there are many possible meanings but no closure
- indeterminacy, fluidity and inherent inadequacy of language
- all discourse being open to interrogation, but not to the resolution of a definitive reading
- deconstruction of ideas in a text to subvert and destroy idea of clear meanings with coherence, truth or logical boundaries
- 'aporia' or meanings which can never be resolved
- illuminating the contradictory meanings within texts and systems
- questioning binary oppositions such as male/female, logic/emotion, black/white
- challenging such hierarchical pairings
- looking for the tension, ambiguity or contradiction inherent in a work which would cause it to unravel

Classroom examples

- exploring what the text has suppressed in order to convey false picture of coherence or meaningfulness
- trying to expose the 'lines of construction' in texts, which shape the illusion of meaning
- deconstructing the ideology underpinning texts

Marxist Literary Theory
Values

- recognition of relationships between literary works and economic, class, social or ideological factors
- interpretation of literature as a representation of Marxist dialectical theory of the owners of production oppressing the workers
- literature as a critique of the existence of class structures and oppression of the many by the few
- social context of art (rather than form, technique or aesthetic considerations)
- social realism as tool for revolutionary social change
- challenging texts by pointing out what they fail to say, because of their ideological position
- de-privileging of the 'canon'
- challenging any literary authority
- giving prominence to work by lower classes and minorities

Classroom examples

- with reference to a particular poem, students ask in what way those with less power are trying to gain more power, and what economic and ideological and class issues are at work
- students are trained to ask how a text tries to maintain a social order which is oppressive to marginal groups and to idealise away any social conflicts and what class-ridden attitudes and behaviours does the text challenge or further solidify

Postmodernism

Values

- the collapse of meaning (rejection of the idea that there can be any absolute truth or authority)
- pluralistic structures of authority, giving all participants a voice
- intricacy, pyrotechnics, parody, artifice and pastiche
- interference with patterns and with distortions of ordered sequence such as chronology or linear narrative
- experimentation with the fictionality of fiction, blurring boundaries between research and invention, between journalism and fiction.
- nihilism, cynicism and despair
- fluidity and plurality of meanings rather than dualistic pairing of opposites (seen to be artificial and distorting)

Classroom examples

- focus on texts which collapse boundaries between high and popular culture, using pastiche, parody and self-consciously constructed narrative forms
- creative writing which aims to interact with readers in a teasing or abrasive manner, rather than seeing readers as collaborators
- writing deliberately fragmented texts in which the unreal, the hyper-real and the surreal keep shifting
- rewriting famous texts with significant disruptions

Cultural Studies

Values

- "culture" as anything produced by society
- any cultural product from the long weekend to a rock concert program being seen as a text for study.
• analysis of cultural objects to clarify implicit meanings and values
• "literature" not to be valued above popular culture or everyday artefacts
• looking forward to a socialist utopia which would bring about a levelling of value hierarchies

Classroom examples
• analysis of the long weekend as a social phenomenon which conveys attitudes and values
• analysis of rock concert program, fashion magazine or film poster as cultural artefact, exploring what it reveals about society's values
• rewriting well-known texts with changes in the balance of power

Feminist Literary Theory

Values

• claim that society has marginalised and suppressed women, and that this is reflected in texts
• subversion of the opposition of men and women (in literary works and criticism)
• study of how women are represented in literary works especially "classics"
• highlighting the value of works written by women
• the construction of new discourses to overturn women's exclusion from literature except as the object of men
• recognition that some types of literary criticism are "masculine" in nature, especially text-centred criticism which allows authors some authority and which depend on rules and structures
• the idea that feminine qualities such as plurality of meanings and focus on community are evident in some types of literary theory, such as reader-response theory
• "écriture féminine" which opposes masculinist ideas of grammar and logical categories, and focuses on the unconscious, diversity of desires, the body, and the inclusion of "the Other"

Classroom examples
• study of neglected women writers
• study or depiction of women characters as marginal or oppressed, and writing which aims to redress this imbalance or invert it
• study of certain literary theories or approaches as more or less feminine or masculine
• exploration of literary concepts which might allow more room for difference, such as open-ended plurality of readings

Queer Theory

Values

• literature which violates and troubles established boundaries between male and female
• the idea that sexual categories are regulatory fictions constructed by society
• refusal to link identity with gender as traditionally understood
• extrapolation of this to categories of normal/abnormal and self/other
• the idea of "queer(y)ing - a reading of literary works which questions conventional readings and even the existence of conventions
• implications such as: literary characters who dress as the opposite sex are portraying gender as an ongoing impersonation of something unreal

Classroom examples
• studying works which radically challenge the idea of gender identity

• rewriting well-known works from gay or lesbian perspective

• reflection on the effects of cross-dressing in the plots of some renaissance plays

Reader-Response Theory

Values

• the idea that every text contains gaps which readers fill in from experience of the world and knowledge of literary and cultural conventions, which form ‘horizons of expectations’

• openness of literary works to be experienced differently by each responder

• the question of whether the text directs or causes the reader to respond in certain ways or whether readers impose their ideas on the text (resulting in irreducible subjectivity)

• the potential literary works have to increase the reader's self-knowledge and fulfil unconscious psychological needs

• the seeking of identity themes in literature

• shared conventions in reading communities, like rules of specific sports

• recognition of negotiations between the reader, the text, and social and historical reality

• emphasis on reception of texts by their original audience

Classroom examples

• focusing on students with different backgrounds making meaning from texts in diverse ways

• wide diversity of texts being studied, including those which reflect working class experience

• classroom exploration of the way different individuals fill in gaps in a text in varying ways