**Literary Theory Overview**

**New Historicism:**An approach to literature that emphasises the interaction between a work’s historical context and a modern reader’s understanding and interpretation of the work.    New historicists attempt to describe the culture of a period by reading many different kinds of texts and paying close attention to many different dimensions of a culture, including political, economic, social and aesthetic concerns.  They regard texts not simply as a reflection of the culture that produced them but also as a productive of that culture playing an active role in the social and political conflicts of an age.  New historicism acknowledges and then explores various versions of “history,” sensitizing us to the fact that the history on which we choose to focus is coloured by being reconstructed from our present circumstances.

**Modernism, Formalism, Structuralism**: This is different from structural criticism, which looks at the universal qualities of a piece of literature.  Structuralism is a theory that concentrates completely upon the text, bringing nothing else to it.  It depends, for a large part, upon linguistic theory, so it is difficult to do without some background.  On the most basic level, however, structuralism investigates the kinds of patterns that are built up and broken down in a text and uses them to get at an interpretation of that text.  This theory is predominantly concerned with the perceptions and description of structures.

**Mythological criticism:**An approach to literature that seeks to identify what in a work creates deep, universal responses in readers, by paying close attention to the hopes, fears, and expectations of entire cultures.  Mythological critics (sometimes called archetypal critics) analyze literature for underlying recurrent patterns that reveal universal meanings and basic human experiences for the readers regardless of when and where they live.  These critics attempt to explain how archetypes (the characters, images, and themes that symbolically embody universal meanings and experiences) are embodied in literary works in order to make larger connections that explain a particular work’s lasting appeal.  Mythological critics may specialize in areas such as classical literature, philology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural history, but they all emphasize the assumptions and values of various cultures.

**Marxist criticism:**An approach to literature that focuses on a work’s ideological content – its explicit and implicit assumptions and values about matters such as culture, race, class, and power.  Marxist criticism, based largely on the writings of Karl Marx, typically aims at not only revealing and clarifying ideological issues but also correcting social injustices.  Some Marxist critics use literature to describe the competing socioeconomic interests that too often advance capitalist interests such as money and power rather than socialist interests such as morality and justice.  They argue that literature and literary criticism are essentially political because they either challenge or support economic oppression.  Because of this strong emphasis on the political aspects of texts, Marxist criticism focuses more on the content and themes of literature than on its form.

**Feminist criticism:**An approach to literature that seeks to correct or supplement what may be regarded as a predominantly male-dominated critical perspective with a feminist consciousness.  Feminist criticism places literature in a social context and uses a broad range of disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, and linguistics, to provide a perspective sensitive to feminist issues.  Feminist theories also attempt to understand representation from a woman’s point of view and to explain women’s writing strategies specific to their social condition.  Focuses on Male Dominance of Literary Studies, Male Orientation in New Criticism, Becoming a Resisting Reader, Enlarging the Canon, Reaching out to other marginalized groups, An Orientation not a Method, Feminism in Everyday Use.

**Formalist criticism:**An approach to literature that focuses on the formal elements of a work, such as its language, structure, and tone.  Formalist critics offer intense examinations of the relationship between form and meaning in a work, emphasizing the subtle complexity in how the work is arranged.  Formalists pay special attention to diction, irony, paradox, metaphor, and symbol, as well as larger elements such as plot, characterization, and narrative technique.  Formalist critics read literature as an independent work of art rather than as a reflection of the author’s state of mind or as a representation of a moment in history.  Therefore anything outside of the work, including historical influences and authorial intent, is generally not examined by formalist critics.

**Psychological/Psychoanalytical/Freudian criticism**An approach to literature that draws on psychoanalytic theories, especially those of Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan, to understand more fully the text, the writer, and the reader.  The basis of this approach is the idea of the existence of a human unconscious – those impulses, desires, and feelings about which a person is unaware but which influence emotions and behaviour.  Critics use psychological approaches to explore the motivations of characters and the symbolic meaning of events while biographers speculate about a writer’s own motivations – conscious or unconscious—in a literary work.  Psychological approaches are also used to describe and analyze the reader’s personal response to a text.  Id, Ego, Superego; Oedipus Complex, Electra Complex; Repression, Character Analysis