

Definition of postcolonial criticism

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DEFINITION OF POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM A type of cultural criticism, postcolonial criticism usually involves the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point in their history. Alternatively, it can refer to the analysis of texts written about colonized places by writers hailing from the colonizing culture. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial criticism and studies, focused on the way in which the colonizing First World has invented false images and myths of the Third (postcolonial) World—stereotypical images and myths that have conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination of Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures and peoples. In the essay "Postcolonial Criticism" (1992), Homi K. Bhabha has shown how certain cultures (mis)represent other cultures, thereby extending their political and social domination in the modern world order. Postcolonial studies, a type of cultural studies, refers more broadly to the study of cultural groups, practices, and discourses—including but not limited to literary discourses—in the colonized world. The term postcolonial is usually used broadly to refer to the study of works written at any point after colonization first occurred in a given country, although it is sometimes used more specifically to refer to the analysis of texts and other cultural discourses that emerged after the end of the colonial period (after the success of the liberation and independence movements). Among feminist critics, the postcolonial perspective has inspired an attempt to recover whole cultures of women heretofore ignored or marginalized—women who speak not only from colonized places but also from the colonizing places to which many of them fled. Postcolonial criticism has been influenced by Marxist thought, by the work of Michel Foucault (whose theories about the power of

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discourses have influenced the new historicism), and by deconstruction, which has challenged not only hierarchical, binary oppositions such as West/East and North/South but also the notions of superiority associated with the first term of each opposition. DEFINITION OF FORMALISM Formalism is a general term covering several similar types of literary criticism that arose in the 1920s and 1930s, flourished during the 1940s and 1950s, and are still in evidence today. Formalists see the literary work as an object in its own right. Thus, they tend to devote their attention to its intrinsic nature, concentrating their analyses on the interplay and relationships between the text's essential verbal elements. They study the form of the work (as opposed to its content), although form to a formalist can connote anything from genre (for example, one may speak of "the sonnet form") to grammatical or rhetorical structure to the "emotional imperative" that engenders the work's (more mechanical) structure. No matter which connotation of form pertains, however, formalists seek to be objective in their analysis, focusing on the work itself and eschewing external considerations. They pay particular attention to literary devices used in the work and to the patterns these devices establish. Formalism developed largely in reaction to the practice of interpreting literary texts by relating them to "extrinsic" issues, such as the historical circumstances and politics of the era in which the work was written, its philosophical or theological milieu, or the experiences and frame of mind of its author. Although the term formalism was coined by critics to disparage the movement, it is now used simply as a descriptive term. Formalists have generally suggested that everyday language, which serves simply to communicate information, is stale and unimaginative. They argue that "literariness" has the capacity to overturn common and expected

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patterns (of grammar, of story line), thereby rejuvenating language. Such novel uses of language supposedly enable readers to experience not only language but also the world in an entirely new way. A number of schools of literary criticism have adopted a formalist orientation, or at least make use of formalist concepts. The New Criticism, an American approach to literature that reached its height in the 1940s and 1950s, is perhaps the most famous type of formalism. But Russian formalism was the first major formalist movement; after the Stalinist regime suppressed it in the early 1930s, the Prague Linguistic Circle adopted its analytical methods. The Chicago School has also been classified as formalist, insofar as the Chicago critics examined and analyzed works on an individual basis; their interest in historical material, on the other hand, was clearly not formalist.

DEFINITION OF THE NEW CRITICISM The New Criticism is a type of formalist literary criticism that reached its height during the 1940s and 1950s and that received its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. New Critics treat a work of literature as if it were a self-contained, self-referential object. Rather than basing their interpretations of a text on the reader's response, the author's stated intentions, or parallels between the text and historical contexts (such as author's life), New Critics perform a close reading, concentrating on the relationships within the text that give it its own distinctive character or form. New Critics emphasize that the structure of a work should not be divorced from meaning, viewing the two as constituting a quasi-organic unity. Special attention is paid to repetition, particularly of images or symbols, but also of sound effects and rhythms in poetry. New Critics especially appreciate the use of literary devices, such as irony, to achieve a balance or reconciliation between dissimilar, even conflicting,

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elements in a text. Because it stresses close textual analysis and viewing the text as a carefully crafted, orderly object containing formal, observable patterns, the New Criticism has sometimes been called an "objective" approach to literature. New Critics are more likely than certain other critics to believe and say that the meaning of a text can be known objectively. For instance, reader-response critics see meaning as a function either of each reader's experience or of the norms that govern a particular interpretive community, and deconstructors argue that texts mean opposite things at the same time. The foundations of the New Criticism were laid in books and essays written during the 1920s and 1930s by I. A. Richards (*Practical Criticism* [1929]), William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* [1930]), and T. S. Eliot ("The Function of Criticism" [1933]). The approach was significantly developed later, however, by a group of American poets and critics, including R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and William K. Wimsatt. Although we associate the New Criticism with certain principles and terms—such as affective fallacy (the notion that the reader's response is relevant to the meaning of a work) and intentional fallacy (the notion that the author's intention determines the work's meaning)—the New Critics were trying to make a cultural statement rather than to establish a critical dogma. Generally southern, religious, and culturally conservative, they advocated the inherent value of literary works (particularly of literary works regarded as beautiful art objects) because they were sick of the growing ugliness of modern life and contemporary events. Some recent theorists even link the rising popularity after World War II of the New Criticism (and other types of formalist literary criticism such as the Chicago School) to American isolationism. These critics tend to view the

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formalist tendency to isolate literature from biography and history as symptomatic of American fatigue with wider involvements. Whatever the source of the New Criticism's popularity (or the reason for its eventual decline), its practitioners and the textbooks they wrote were so influential in American academia that the approach became standard in college and even high school curricula through the 1960s and well into the 1970s.

DEFINITION OF MARXIST CRITICISM Marxist criticism is a type of criticism in which literary works are viewed as the product of work and whose practitioners emphasize the role of class and ideology as they reflect, propagate, and even challenge the prevailing social order. Rather than viewing texts as repositories for hidden meanings, Marxist critics view texts as material products to be understood in broadly historical terms. In short, literary works are viewed as a product of work (and hence of the realm of production and consumption we call economics). Marxism began with Karl Marx, the nineteenth-century German philosopher best known for *Das Kapital* (1867; *Capital*), the seminal work of the communist movement. Marx was also the first Marxist literary critic, writing critical essays in the 1830s on such writers as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and William Shakespeare. Even after Marx met Friedrich Engels in 1843 and began collaborating on overtly political works such as *The German Ideology* (1846) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), he maintained a keen interest in literature. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels discuss the relationship between the arts, politics, and basic economic reality in terms of a general social theory. Economics, they argue, provides the base, or infrastructure, of society, from which a superstructure consisting of law, politics, philosophy, religion, and art emerges. The revolution anticipated by Marx and Engels did not occur in their century, let

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alone in their lifetime. When it did occur, in 1917, it did so in a place unimagined by either theorist: Russia, a country long ruled by despotic czars but also enlightened by the works of powerful novelists and playwrights including Anton Chekhov, Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Russia produced revolutionaries like Vladimir Lenin, who shared not only Marx's interest in literature but also his belief in its ultimate importance. Leon Trotsky, Lenin's comrade in revolution, took a strong interest in literary matters as well, publishing *Literature and Revolution* (1924), which is still viewed as a classic of Marxist literary criticism. Of those critics active in the Soviet Union after the expulsion of Trotsky and the triumph of Stalin, two stand out: Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács. Bakhtin viewed language—especially literary texts—in terms of discourses and dialogues. A novel written in a society in flux, for instance, might include an official, legitimate discourse, as well as one infiltrated by challenging comments. Lukács, a Hungarian who converted to Marxism in 1919, appreciated pre revolutionary realistic novels that broadly reflected cultural "totalities" and were populated with characters representing human "types" of the author's place and time. Perhaps because Lukács was the best of the Soviet communists writing Marxist criticism in the 1930s and 1940s, non-Soviet Marxists tended to develop their ideas by publicly opposing his. In Germany, dramatist and critic Bertolt Brecht criticized Lukács for his attempt to enshrine realism at the expense not only of the other "isms" but also of poetry and drama, which Lukács had largely ignored. Walter Benjamin praised new art forms ushered in by the age of mechanical reproduction, and Theodor Adorno attacked Lukács for his dogmatic rejection of nonrealist modern literature and for his elevation of content over

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form. In addition to opposing Lukács and his overly constrictive canon, non-Soviet Marxists took advantage of insights generated by non-Marxist critical theories being developed in post-World War II Europe. Lucien Goldmann, a Romanian critic living in Paris, combined structuralist principles with Marx's base superstructure model in order to show how economics determines the mental structures of social groups, which are reflected in literary texts. Goldmann rejected the idea of individual human genius, choosing instead to see works as the "collective" products of "trans-individual" mental structures. French Marxist Louis Althusser drew on the ideas of psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan and the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, who discussed the relationship between ideology and hegemony, the pervasive system of assumptions and values that shapes the perception of reality for people in a given culture. Althusser's followers included Pierre Macherey, who in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) developed Althusser's concept of the relationship between literature and ideology; Terry Eagleton, who proposes an elaborate theory about how history enters texts, which in turn may alter history; and Frederic Jameson, who has argued that form is "but the working out" of content "in the realm of the superstructure."

DEFINITION OF STRUCTURALISM Structuralism is a theory of humankind in which all elements of human culture, including literature, are thought to be parts of a system of signs. Critic Robert Scholes has described structuralism as a reaction to "'modernist' alienation and despair." European structuralists such as Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes (before his shift toward poststructuralism) attempted to develop a semiology, or semiotics (science of signs). Barthes, among others, sought to recover literature and even language from the isolation in which they had

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been studied and to show that the laws that govern them govern all signs, from road signs to articles of clothing. Structuralism was heavily influenced by linguistics, especially by the pioneering work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Particularly useful to structuralists was Saussure's concept of the phoneme (the smallest basic speech sound or unit of pronunciation) and his idea that phonemes exist in two kinds of relationships: diachronic and synchronic. A phoneme has a diachronic, or "horizontal," relationship with those other phonemes that precede and follow it (as the words appear, left to right, on this page) in a particular usage, utterance, or narrative—what Saussure, a linguist, called *parole* (French for "word"). A phoneme has a synchronic, or "vertical," relationship with the entire system of language within which individual usages, utterances, or narratives have meaning—what Saussure called *langue* (French for "tongue," as in "native tongue," meaning language). An means what it means in English because those of us who speak the language are plugged into the same system (think of it as a computer network where different individuals can access the same information in the same way at a given time). Following Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, an anthropologist, studied hundreds of myths, breaking them into their smallest meaningful units, which he called "mythemes." Removing each from its diachronic relations with other mythemes in a single myth (such as the myth of Oedipus and his mother), he vertically aligned those mythemes that he found to be homologous (structurally correspondent). He then studied the relationships within as well as between vertically aligned columns, in an attempt to understand scientifically, through ratios and proportions, those thoughts and processes that humankind has shared, both at one particular time and across time. Whether Lévi-Strauss was studying

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the structure of myths or the structure of villages, he looked for recurring, common elements that transcended the differences within and among cultures. Structuralists followed Saussure in preferring to think about the overriding langue, or language of myth, in which each mytheme and mytheme-constituted myth fits meaningfully, rather than about isolated individual paroles, or narratives. Structuralists also followed Saussure's lead in believing that sign systems must be understood in terms of binary oppositions (a proposition later disputed by poststructuralist Jacques Derrida). In analyzing myths and texts to find basic structures, structuralists found that opposite terms modulate until they are finally resolved or reconciled by some intermediary third term. Thus a structuralist reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) might show that the war between God and the rebellious angels becomes a rift between God and sinful, fallen man, a rift that is healed by the Son of God, the mediating third term. Although structuralism was largely a European phenomenon in its origin and development, it was influenced by American thinkers as well. Noam Chomsky, for instance, who powerfully influenced structuralism through works such as *Reflections on Language* (1975), identified and distinguished between "surface structures" and "deep structures" in language and linguistic literatures, including texts.

DEFINITION OF READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Reader-response criticism encompasses various approaches to literature that explore and seek to explain the diversity (and often divergence) of readers' responses to literary works. Louise Rosenblatt is often credited with pioneering the approaches in *Literature as Exploration* (1938). In her 1969 essay "Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading," she summed up her position as follows: "A poem is what the reader lives

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through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text." Recognizing that many critics would reject this definition, Rosenblatt wrote, " The idea that a poem presupposes a reader actively involved with a text is particularly shocking to those seeking to emphasize the objectivity of their interpretations." Rosenblatt implicitly and generally refers to formalists (the most influential of whom are the New Critics) when she speaks of supposedly objective interpreters shocked by the notion that a " poem" is cooperatively produced by a " reader" and a " text." Formalists spoke of " the poem itself," the " concrete work of art," the " real poem." They had no interest in what a work of literature makes a reader " live through." In fact, in *The Verbal Icon* (1954), William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley used the term affective fallacy to define as erroneous the very idea that a reader's response is relevant to the meaning of a literary work. Stanley Fish, whose early work is seen by some as marking the true beginning of contemporary reader-response criticism, also took issue with the tenets of formalism. In " Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics" (1970), he argued that any school of criticism that sees a literary work as an object, claiming to describe what it is and never what it does, misconstrues the very essence of literature and reading. Literature exists and signifies when it is read, Fish suggests, and its force is an affective one. Furthermore, reading is a temporal process, not a spatial one as formalists assume when they step back and survey the literary work as if it were an object spread out before them. The German critic Wolfgang Iser has described that process in *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974) and *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1976). Iser argues that texts contain gaps (or blanks) that powerfully affect the reader, who

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must explain them, connect what they separate, and create in his or her mind aspects of a work that aren't in the text but are incited by the text. With the redefinition of literature as something that only exists meaningfully in the mind of the reader, and with the redefinition of the literary work as a catalyst of mental events, comes a redefinition of the reader. No longer is the reader the passive recipient of those ideas that an author has planted in a text. "The reader is active," Rosenblatt had insisted. Fish makes the same point in "Literature in the Reader": "Reading is . . . something you do." Iser, in focusing critical interest on the gaps in texts, on the blanks that readers have to fill in, similarly redefines the reader as an active maker of meaning. Other reader-response critics define the reader differently. Wayne Booth uses the phrase the implied reader to mean the reader "created by the work." Iser also uses the term the implied reader but substitutes the educated reader for what Fish calls the intended reader. Since the mid-1970s, reader-response criticism has evolved into a variety of new forms. Subjectivists like David Bleich, Norman Holland, and Robert Crosman have viewed the reader's response not as one "guided" by the text but rather as one motivated by deep-seated, personal, psychological needs. Holland has suggested that, when we read, we find our own "identity theme" in the text by using "the literary work to symbolize and finally replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire." Even Fish has moved away from reader-response criticism as he had initially helped define it, focusing on "interpretive strategies" held in common by "interpretive communities"—such as the one comprised by American college students reading a novel as a class assignment. Fish's shift in focus is in many ways typical of changes that have taken place within the field of

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reader-response criticism—a field that, because of those changes, is increasingly being referred to as reader-oriented criticism. Recent reader-oriented critics, responding to Fish's emphasis on interpretive communities and also to the historically oriented perception theory of Hans Robert Jauss, have studied the way a given reading public's " horizons of expectations" change over time. Many of these contemporary critics view themselves as reader-oriented critics and as practitioners of some other critical approach as well. Certain feminist and gender critics with an interest in reader response have asked whether there is such a thing as " reading like a woman."

Reading-oriented new historicists have looked at the way in which racism affects and is affected by reading and, more generally, at the way in which politics can affect reading practices and outcomes. Gay and lesbian critics, such as Wayne Koestenbaum, have argued that sexualities have been similarly constructed within and by social discourses and that there may even be a homosexual way of reading.

DEFINITION OF PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

Psychoanalytic criticism originated in the work of Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who pioneered the technique of psychoanalysis. Freud developed a language that described, a model that explained, and a theory that encompassed human psychology. His theories are directly and indirectly concerned with the nature of the unconscious mind. The psychoanalytic approach to literature not only rests on the theories of Freud; it may even be said to have begun with Freud, who wrote literary criticism as well as psychoanalytic theory. Probably because of Freud's characterization of the artist's mind as " one urged on by instincts that are too clamorous, " psychoanalytic criticism written before 1950 tended to psychoanalyze the individual author. Literary works were read-

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sometimes unconvincingly—as fantasies that allowed authors to indulge repressed wishes, to protect themselves from deep-seated anxieties, or both. After 1950, psychoanalytic critics began to emphasize the ways in which authors create works that appeal to readers' repressed wishes and fantasies. Consequently, they shifted their focus away from the author's psyche toward the psychology of the reader and the text. Norman Holland's theories, concerned more with the reader than with the text, helped to establish reader-response criticism. Critics influenced by D. W. Winnicott, an object-relations theorist, have questioned the tendency to see the reader/text as an either/or construct; instead, they have seen reader and text (or audience and play) in terms of a relationship taking place in what Winnicott calls a "transitional" or "potential space"—space in which binary oppositions like real/illusory and objective/subjective have little or no meaning. Jacques Lacan, another post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorist, focused on language and language-related issues. Lacan treats the unconscious as a language; consequently, he views the dream not as Freud did (that is, as a form and symptom of repression) but rather as a form of discourse. Thus we may study dreams psychoanalytically in order to learn about literature, even as we may study literature in order to learn more about the unconscious. Lacan also revised Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex—the childhood wish to displace the parent of one's own sex and take his or her place in the affections of the parent of the opposite sex—by relating it to the issue of language. He argues that the pre-oedipal stage is also a preverbal or "mirror stage," a stage he associates with the imaginary order. He associates the subsequent oedipal stage—which roughly coincides with the child's entry into language—with what he calls the symbolic order, in <https://assignbuster.com/definition-of-postcolonial-criticism/>

which words are not the things they stand for but substitutes for those things. The imaginary order and the symbolic order are two of Lacan's three orders of subjectivity, the third being the real, which involves intractable and substantial things or states that cannot be imagined, symbolized, or known directly (such as death).

DEFINITION OF THE NEW HISTORICISM The new historicism developed during the 1980s, largely in reaction to the text-only approach pursued by formalist New Critics and the critics who challenged the New Criticism in the 1970s. New historicists, like formalists and their critics, acknowledge the importance of the literary text, but they also analyze the text with an eye to history. In this respect, the new historicism is not "new"; the majority of critics between 1920 and 1950 focused on a work's historical content and based their interpretations on the interplay between the text and historical contexts (such as the author's life or intentions in writing the work). In other respects, however, the new historicism differs from the historical criticism of the 1930s and 1940s. It is informed by the poststructuralist and reader-response theory of the 1970s, as well as by the thinking of feminist, cultural, and Marxist critics whose work was also "new" in the 1980s. They are less fact- and event-oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely or objectively known. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present, and they are also less likely to think of it in terms of specific eras, each with a definite, persistent, and consistent zeitgeist (spirit of the times). Hence they are unlikely to suggest that a literary text has a single or easily identifiable historical context. New historicist critics also tend to define the discipline of history more broadly

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than did their predecessors. They view history as a social science like anthropology and sociology, whereas older historicists tended to view history as literature's "background" and the social sciences as being properly historical. They have erased the line dividing historical and literary materials, showing not only that the production of one of William Shakespeare's historical plays was both a political act and a historical event, but also that the coronation of Elizabeth I was carried out with the same care for staging and symbol lavished on works of dramatic art. New historicists remind us that it is treacherous to reconstruct the past as it really was—rather than as we have been conditioned by our own place and time to believe that it was. And they know that the job is impossible for those who are unaware of that difficulty, insensitive to the bent or bias of their own historical vantage point. Thus, when new historicist critics describe a historical change, they are highly conscious of (and even likely to discuss) the theory of historical change that informs their account. Many new historicists have acknowledged a profound indebtedness to the writings of Michel Foucault. A French philosophical historian, Foucault brought together incidents and phenomena from areas normally seen as unconnected, encouraging new historicists and new cultural historicists to redefine the boundaries of historical inquiry. Like the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Foucault refused to see history as an evolutionary process, a continuous development from cause to effect, from past to present toward THE END, a moment of definite closure, a Day of Judgment. No historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, each event is tied into a vast web of economic, social, and political factors. Like Karl Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but unlike Marx, he viewed power not simply as a repressive force or a tool of

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conspiracy but rather as a complex of forces that produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself empowered by discourses and practices that constitute power. Not all new historicist critics owe their greatest debt to Foucault. Some, like Stephen Greenblatt, have been most nearly influenced by the British cultural critic Raymond Williams, and others, like Brook Thomas, have been more influenced by German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin. Still others—Jerome McGann, for example—have followed the lead of Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who viewed literary works in terms of polyphonic discourses and dialogues between the official, legitimate voices of society and other, more challenging or critical voices echoing popular culture.

DEFINITION OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

Feminist criticism became a dominant force in Western literary studies in the late 1970s, when feminist theory more broadly conceived was applied to linguistic and literary matters. Since the early 1980s, feminist literary criticism has developed and diversified in a number of ways and is now characterized by a global perspective. French feminist criticism garnered much of its inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book, *Lé Deuxième Sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*). Beauvoir argued that associating men with humanity more generally (as many cultures do) relegates women to an inferior position in society. Subsequent French feminist critics writing during the 1970s acknowledged Beauvoir's critique but focused on language as a tool of male domination, analyzing the ways in which it represents the world from the male point of view and arguing for the development of a feminine language and writing. Although interested in the subject of feminine language and writing, North American feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s began by analyzing literary texts—not by abstractly

discussing language—via close textual reading and historical scholarship. One group practiced "feminist critique," examining how women characters are portrayed, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in the so-called classics, and demonstrating that attitudes and traditions reinforcing systematic masculine dominance are inscribed in the literary canon. Another group practiced what came to be called "gynocriticism," studying writings by women and examining the female literary tradition to find out how women writers across the ages have perceived themselves and imagined reality. While it gradually became customary to refer to an Anglo-American tradition of feminist criticism, British feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s objected to the tendency of some North American critics to find universal or "essential" feminine attributes, arguing that differences of race, class, and culture gave rise to crucial differences among women across space and time. British feminist critics regarded their own critical practice as more political than that of North American feminists, emphasizing an engagement with historical process in order to promote social change. By the early 1990s, the French, American, and British approaches had so thoroughly critiqued, influenced, and assimilated one another that nationality no longer automatically signaled a practitioner's approach. Today's critics seldom focus on "woman" as a relatively monolithic category; rather, they view "women" as members of different societies with different concerns. Feminists of color, Third World (preferably called postcolonial) feminists, and lesbian feminists have stressed that women are not defined solely by the fact that they are female; other attributes (such as religion, class, and sexual orientation) are also important, making the problems and goals of one group of women different from those of another. Many commentators have argued

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that feminist criticism is by definition gender criticism because of its focus on the feminine gender. But the relationship between feminist and gender criticism is, in fact, complex; the two approaches are certainly not polar opposites but, rather, exist along a continuum of attitudes toward sex, sexuality, gender, and language. DEFINITION OF DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole. As J. Hillis Miller, the preeminent American deconstructor, has explained in an essay entitled "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" (1976), "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air." Deconstruction was both created and has been profoundly influenced by the French philosopher on language Jacques Derrida. Derrida, who coined the term deconstruction, argues that in Western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions. Something is white but not black, masculine and therefore not feminine, a cause rather than an effect. Other common and mutually exclusive pairs include beginning/end, conscious/unconscious, presence/absence, and speech/writing. Derrida suggests these oppositions are hierarchies in miniature, containing one term that Western culture views as positive or superior and another considered negative or inferior, even if only slightly so. Through deconstruction, Derrida aims to erase the boundary between binary oppositions—and to do so in such a way that the hierarchy implied by the oppositions is thrown into question. Although its ultimate aim may be to criticize Western logic, deconstruction arose as a response to structuralism and formalism. Structuralists believed

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that all elements of human culture, including literature, may be understood as parts of a system of signs. Derrida did not believe that structuralists could explain the laws governing human signification and thus provide the key to understanding the form and meaning of everything from an African village to Greek myth to a literary text. He also rejected the structuralist belief that texts have identifiable "centers" of meaning—a belief structuralists shared with formalists. Formalist critics, such as the New Critics, assume that a work of literature is a freestanding, self-contained object whose meaning can be found in the complex network of relations between its parts (allusions, images, rhythms, sounds, etc.). Deconstructors, by contrast, see works in terms of their undecidability. They reject the formalist view that a work of literary art is demonstrably unified from beginning to end, in one certain way, or that it is organized around a single center that ultimately can be identified. As a result, deconstructors see texts as more radically heterogeneous than do formalists. Formalists ultimately make sense of the ambiguities they find in a given text, arguing that every ambiguity serves a definite, meaningful, and demonstrable literary function. Undecidability, by contrast, is never reduced, let alone mastered. Though a deconstructive reading can reveal the incompatible possibilities generated by the text, it is impossible for the reader to decide among them. Reader response criticism places strong emphasis on the reader's role in producing the meaning of a literary work. It is in some senses an opposite approach from that of formalism. Whereas formalists treat meaning as objectively inherent in the text, in reader response criticism, the text has no meaning until it is read by a reader who creates the meaning. Unlike the formalistic critical approach, this type of literary criticism insists that works are not universal, that is, that

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they will not always mean more or less the same thing to readers everywhere. Indeed, according to one practitioner of reader response criticism, Norman Holland, the reader imposes his or her own identity on the work, "to a large extent recreating that text in the reader's image." What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reader Response Criticism?

Reader response criticism acknowledges that different people view works differently and that interpretations change over time. However, it also tends to make interpretation highly subjective and consequently does not provide sufficient criteria for judging between two or more different interpretations of the text. Reader response criticism has been used by literary critics ranging from I. A. Richards and Louise Rosenblatt to Walter Gibson and Norman Holland.

An Example of Reader Response Criticism In reading the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament, different readers are likely to have different responses. Someone who has lived a fairly straight and narrow life and who does not feel like he has been rewarded for it is likely to associate with the older brother of the parable and sympathize with his opposition to the celebration over the prodigal son's return. Someone with a more checkered past would probably approach the parable with more sympathy for the younger brother. A parent who had had difficulties with a rebellious child would probably focus on the father, and, depending on his or her experience, might see the father's unconditional acceptance of the prodigal as either good and merciful or as unwise and overindulgent. While the parable might disturb some, it could elicit a feeling of relief from others.

When using reader response criticism as a tool of analysis, you could write about how the author evokes a particular reaction in you as the reader, what features of your own identity influence you in creating your interpretation,

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and how another reader in a different situation might interpret the work differently.