# THE ENGLISH MAJOR'S
## LITERARY THEORY CHEAT SHEET

## *A Note from the Author/Collator/Editor/Fellow Cheater:*

It's ridiculous to think that you can boil down vast architectures of cultural and historical knowledge into bullet-list summaries, yet this is what I offer here. Do not mistake these for a comprehensive understanding of literary theory, or even for a thorough summary of the intricacies of each form of analysis. This is a basic, incomplete, primer on the major schools of 20th- and 21st-century literary theory. It is by no means exhaustive, but it collects the basic points for these schools.

Each school or method has a very short introduction, then a series of lists that try to capture how those critics engage the world/culture/historical moment/text, the actions they perform while engaging these topics of study, and the questions they ask concerning literary texts. While I have stolen/borrowed/co-opted much of this material, I attempt to acknowledge the various sources at the conclusion of the document.

## *How to Use this Document:*

First, remember that literary theory exists to allow us multiple ways of understanding texts. Analyses that offer you something to consider about a text work in service of that text, not in service of a theory. "Pure" theoretical readings of texts are very rare. In my experience, analyses that truly illuminate a text use multiple critical lenses, because these theories are tools we pick up and put down; each tool is suited for certain jobs and unsuited for others.

## *Contents:*

## Structuralism and Semiotics

Structuralism looks at the world as its title implies: it is predominantly concerned with the perceptions and description of structures. Structuralism claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, but is determined by all the other elements involved in that situation. The full significance of any entity cannot be perceived unless and until it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part.

All human activity is constructed, not natural or "essential." Consequently, the systems of organization are important (what we do is always a matter of selection within a given construct). By this formulation, "any activity, from the actions of a narrative to not eating one's peas with a knife, takes place within a system of differences and has meaning only in its relation to other possible activities within that system, not to some meaning that emanates from nature or the divine" (Childers & Hentzi 286).



"Now! *That* should clear up a few things around here!"

Semiotics is the science of signs. Semiology proposes that a great diversity of our human action and productions—our bodily postures and gestures, the social rituals we perform, the clothes we wear, the meals we serve, the buildings we inhabit—all convey "shared" meanings to members of a particular culture, and so can be analyzed as signs which function in diverse kinds of signifying systems. Linguistics (the study of verbal signs and structures) is only one branch of semiotics, but supplies the basic methods and terms which are used in the study of all other social sign systems.

## *How they think:*

1. Language structures our perception of the world around us.
2. Language is understandable as a system of signs; furthermore, signs function as a language.
3. A given sign is densely interconnected with other signs.
4. Signs are understandable synchronically.
5. Signs are understandable diachronically.
6. Literature and literary representatives are manifestations of sign systems and provide occasions for their study.
7. No sign is ever fully understandable.
8. Language is all there is; the "reality effect" of a text is *produced* by the sign system, not r*eproduced* by it.

## What they do:

1.  They analyze (mainly) prose narratives, relating the text to some larger containing structure, such as:

    (a) the conventions of a particular literary genre, or

    (b) a network of intertextual connections, or

    (c) a projected model of an underlying universal narrative structure, or

    (d) a notion of narrative as a complex of recurrent patterns or motifs.

2.  They interpret literature in terms of a range of underlying parallels with the structures of language, as described by modern linguistics. For instance, the notion of the "mytheme," posited by Levi-Strauss, denoting the minimal units of narrative "sense," is formed on the analogy of the morpheme, which, in linguistics, is the smallest unit of grammatical sense. An example of a morpheme is the "ed" added to a verb to denote the past tense.

3.  They apply the concept of systematic patterning and structuring to the whole field of Western culture, and across cultures, treating as "systems of signs" anything from Ancient Greek myths to brands of soap powder.

## Questions they ask:

*   What patterns exist within the text that make it a part of other texts like it?

*   What patterns exist within the text that make it a product of a larger culture? What is the relationship between the text and the culture from which it emerged?

*   What patterns exist within the text that connect it to the larger "human" experience? Can we connect patterns and elements within the text to other texts from other cultures in order to map similarities that tell us more about the common human experience? (This is a liberal humanist move that assumes that since we are all human, we all share basic human commonalities.)

*   What rules or codes of interpretation must be internalized in order to "make sense" of the text?

*   What are the underlying principles that govern the composition of a particular text?

*   What are the principles of narrative progression, and how are they in this particular text?

*   What are the common principles of characterization, and how are they used in this text?

## Key Terms:

**Binary Opposition:** "pairs of mutually-exclusive signifiers in a paradigm set representing categories which are logically opposed and which together define a complete universe of discourse (relevant ontological domain), e.g. alive/not-alive. In such oppositions each term necessarily implies its opposite and there is no middle term" (Chandler).

**Mythemes:** a term developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Mythemes are the smallest component parts of a myth. By breaking up myths into mythemes, those structures

(mythemes) may be studied chronologically (~ diacrhonically) or synchronically/relationally.

**Sign vs. Symbol:** According to Saussure, "words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are 'signs' which are made up of two parts (like two sides of a sheet of paper): a mark, either written or spoken, called a 'signifier,' and a concept (what is 'thought' when the mark is made), called a 'signified'" (Selden and Widdowson 104). The distinction is important because Saussure contended that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary; the only way we can distinguish meaning is by difference (one sign or word differs from another).

The relational nature of language implied by Saussure's system rejects the concept that a word/symbol corresponds to an outside object/referent. Instead, meaning—the interpretation of a sign—can exist only in relationship with other signs. Selden and Widdowson use the sign system of traffic lights as an example. The color red, in that system, signifies "stop," even though "there is no natural bond between red and stop" (105). Meaning is derived entirely through difference, "a system of opposites and contrasts," e.g., referring back to the traffic lights' example, red's meaning depends on the fact that it is not green and not amber (105).

**Structuralist narratology:** "a form of structuralism . . . that illustrates how a story's meaning develops from its overall structure (its *langue*) rather than from each individual story's isolated theme. To ascertain a text's meaning, narratologists emphasize grammatical elements such as verb tenses and the relationships and configurations of figures of speech within the story" (Bressler 275).

## Semiotician at a Party



Expectation | Reality

I'M REALLY INTO SEMIOLOGY.

OH YEAH — WHAT'S YOUR SIGN?

ANOTHER Sun Exclusive @semioprobs

SEMIOTICS?

IT LOOKED LIKE BEING ANOTHER TERRIBLY LONG EVENING

# New Criticism/ Formalism

New Criticism started in the late 1920s and 1930s, when several critics reacted to traditional criticism, which they saw as largely concerned with matters extraneous to the text (e.g., the biography or psychology of the author, or the work's relationship to literary history). New Criticism proposed that a work of literary art should be regarded as autonomous, and so should not be judged by reference to considerations beyond itself. A poem consists less of a series of referential and verifiable statements about the "real" world beyond it, than of the presentation and sophisticated organization of a set of complex experiences in a verbal form.



"If you can figure out the words in a text message, you can figure out the words in Chaucer."
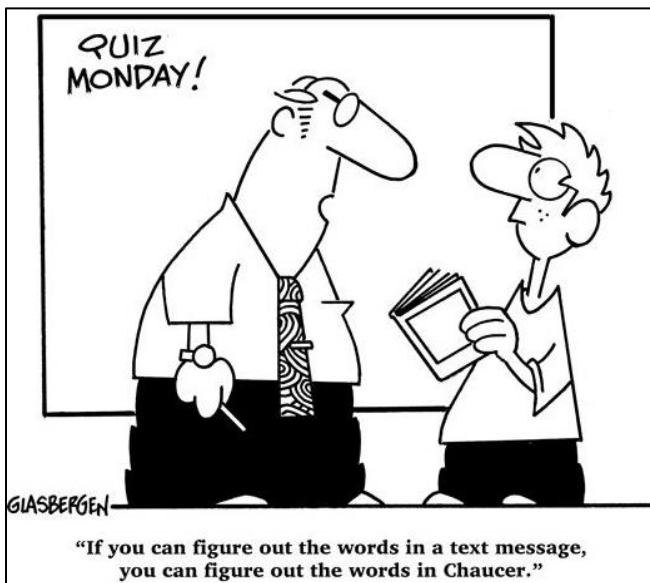
## *How they think:*

1. The aesthetic experience is unique, powerful, and significant.
2. Literature has formal aspects that distinguish it clearly from other types of expression.
3. Literature can be successfully divided into genres.
4. Literary analysis has its own specific interests, focuses, and, of course, terminology that differentiate it from the fields of history, psychology, and sociology.
5. Literature has meaning(s) beyond the "intent" and biography of the author. Authorial intent is ultimately unknowable, and thus worthless for our consideration.
6. Close reading, with an attention to form, language, and the use of literary devices (especially irony and ambiguity) are key to a discussion of literature's qualities, themes, and functions.

## *What they do:*

1. They perform a close reading of a text, which is "a close and detailed analysis of the text itself to arrive at an interpretation without referring to historical, authorial, or cultural concerns" (Bressler, 263).
2. They avoid errors of interpretation like the Intentional Fallacy (equating the meaning of a poem with the author's intentions), the Affective Fallacy (confusing the meaning of a text with how it makes the reader feel), and the Heresy of Paraphrase (assuming that an interpretation of a literary work could consist of a detailed summary or paraphrase).

3. They privilege elements of the text which require higher-order thinking, such as irony, ambiguity, and paradox.

## *Questions they ask:*

- In what ways do the literary elements of the text support the overall theme or meaning?

- How does the text use imagery to develop its own symbols?

- What is the quality of the organic unity of the text, "the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole"? Does how the text is put together reflect what it is?

- How are the various parts of the text interconnected?

- How do paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension work in the text?

- How do these parts and their collective whole contribute to or not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the text?

- How does the author resolve apparent contradictions within the text?

- What does the form of the text say about its content?

- Is there a central or focal passage that can be said to sum up the entirety of the text?

- How do the rhythms and/or rhyme schemes of a poem contribute to the meaning or effect of the text?

## *Key Terms:*

**Aesthetic Experience:** The effects produced on an individual when contemplating a work of art.

**Affective Fallacy:** The reader's emotional response to a text is neither important nor equivalent to its interpretation. Confuses what a poem is (its meaning) with what it does. This fallacy is produced when critics bring in their personal feelings about how a literary work moves them. While New Critics are aware that many readers find meaning in the emotional impact of literature, they are careful to distinguish between subjective emotional responses and objective critical statements about a literary work. Critics, then, should stick closely to the work of art, eliminating the author's intention from consideration, and they should also eliminate their emotional involvement in the reading experience.

**Biographical Fallacy:** Related to the intentional fallacy (see below). Critics commit this when they use an author's life as a frame of reference to interpret a work of art. New Critics take painstaking measures to keep the focus on the work of art itself.

**Close Reading:** A close or detailed analysis of the text itself (its verbal qualities) to arrive at an interpretation without referring to historical, authorial, or cultural concerns.

**Extrinsic Analysis:** Examining elements outside the text to uncover the text's meaning (i.e., authorial biography, historical context).

**Heresy of Paraphrase:** This occurs when readers artificially separate meaning from structure or form, or when writers offer a summary of the plot of a work rather than analysis of the meaning of the work. We cannot assign a meaning to a literary work

unless that meaning can be supported by a close examination of the artistic elements of the text. The work of art, then, is not equal to its paraphrase. A paraphrase will miss the text's uniqueness, with its many connotations and various complexities of thought. Paraphrase cannot reproduce the text, nor does it stand in for analysis.

**Form:** The actual structure of a text, along with the text's overall effect on the reader. All the elements of a text work together to form a single, unified effect.

**Intentional Fallacy:** The erroneous assumption that the interpretation of a literary work can be equated to the author's stated or implied intentions or private meanings, or that a reader can ever determine those intentions. A literary work belongs to the readers, to the public; we should read the work isolated from what the author may have said about it. In other words, the critic never knows specifically what the author intended. The critic, then, must concentrate solely on the extrinsic formal qualities of the text.

**Ontological Critic:** One who recognizes that the text is a concrete entity with a fixed and unchanging meaning.

**Prosody:** The mechanical or structural elements that comprise poetry, such as rhythm, meter, rhyme, stanza, diction, alliteration, etc. Synonymous with "versification."

**Tension:** A term that is synonymous with conflict. It designates the oppositions or conflicts operating with/in a text.

**Text:** A unified collection of various literary devices and conventions that can be objectively analyzed.



*"Those who can't do, comment."*
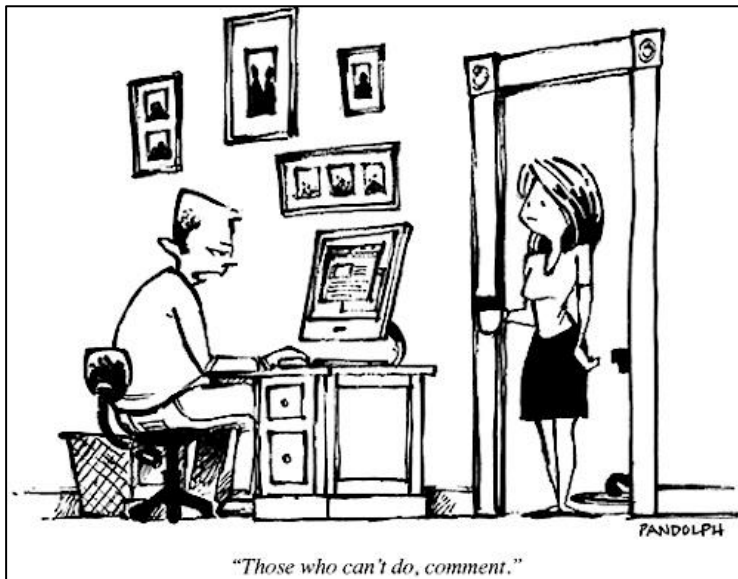
# Deconstruction/ Post-Structuralism

Post-Structuralism is a reaction to structuralism and works against seeing language as a stable, closed system. "It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing literature as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single center, essence, or meaning" (Eagleton 120).
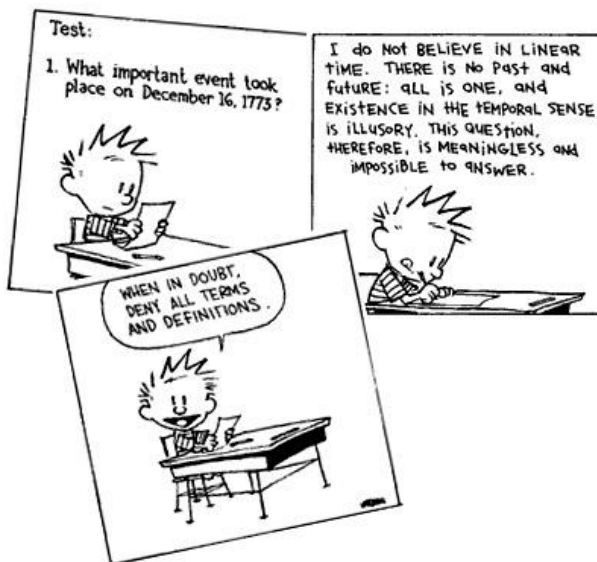
The French philosopher Jacques Derrida argued against, in essence, the notion of a knowable center (the Western ideal of "logocentrism"), a structure that could organize the differential play of language or thought but somehow remain immune to the same "play" it depicts. Derrida's critique of structuralism also heralded the advent of deconstruction that—like post-structuralism—critiques the notion of "origin" built into structuralism. In negative terms, deconstruction has often come to be interpreted as "anything goes," since nothing has any real meaning or truth. More positively, we could say that Derrida (along with many other post-structuralists), really asks for serious analytic rigor, a type of interpretation that is constantly and ruthlessly self-conscious and on guard.

## *How they think:*

1. There is no transcendental signified, giving meaning to all systems.

2. Although relationships among signs account for contextual meanings, those relationships are never fixed, stable, or fully knowable.

3. Western metaphysics lays out the world in a series of oppositional binary pairs, where each term is apparently oppositional to its paired term.

4. However, these pairs are interdependent, as each term relies on its opposite for its definition. These terms are never valued equally.

5. The center of each system is thus unstable and therefore collapses into uncertainty.

6. Yet in order to analyze them, we must read texts as if they have stable centers of meaning; we must use *bricolage*.

7. Texts betray traces of their own instability.

8. There is nothing outside of the text.

9. The deployment of power is polyvalent, as are all forms of signification.

10. Cultural and literary criticism is a form of signification.

## What they do:

1. They "read the text against itself" so as to expose what might be thought of as the "textual subconscious," where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning.

2. They fix upon the surface features of the words — similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, a "dead" (or dying) metaphor — and bring these to the foreground, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning.

3. They seek to show that the text is characterized by disunity rather than unity.

4. They concentrate on a single passage and analyze it so intensively that it becomes impossible to sustain a "univocal" reading and the language explodes into "multiplicities of meaning."

5. They look for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and see these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text. These discontinuities are sometimes called "fault-lines," a geological metaphor referring to the breaks in rock formations which give evidence of previous activity and movement.

## Questions they ask:

- How is language thrown into freeplay or questioned in and by the text?

- How does the text undermine or contradict generally accepted truths?

- How does the author (or a character) omit, change, or reconstruct memory and identity?

- How does a text fulfill or move outside the established conventions of its genre?

- How does the text deal with the separation (or lack thereof) between writer, text, and reader?

- What ideology does the text seem to promote?

- What is left out of the text that, if included, might undermine the goal of the text?

- If we changed the point of view of the text (e.g., from one character to another, or to multiple characters) how would the story change? Whose story is not told in the text? Who is left out and why might the author have omitted this character's tale?

## Key Terms:

**Aporia:** a moment of undecidability; the inherent contradictions found in any text. Derrida, for example, cites the inherent contradictions at work in Rousseau's use of the words *culture* and *nature* by demonstrating that Rousseau's sense of the self's innocence (in nature) is already corrupted by the concept of culture (and existence), and vice-versa.

**Différance:** a combination of the meanings in the word *différance*. The concept means 1) *différer* or to differ, 2) *différance* or to delay or postpone (defer), and 3) the idea of difference itself. To oversimplify, words are always at a distance from what they signify and, to make matters worse, must be described by using other words.

**Erasure (sous rature):** to highlight suspect ideologies, notions linked to the metaphysics of presence, Derrida put them under "erasure," metaphorically pointing

out the absence of any definitive meaning. By using erasure, however, Derrida realized that a "trace" will always remain but that these traces do not indicate the marks themselves but rather the absence of the marks (which emphasize the absence of "univocal meaning, truth, or origin"). In contrast, when Heidegger similarly "crossed out" words, he assumed that meaning would be (eventually) recoverable.

**Logocentrism:** term associated with Derrida that "refers to the nature of western thought, language and culture since Plato's era. The Greek signifier for "word," "speech," and "reason," *logos* possesses connotations in western culture for law and truth. Hence, logocentrism refers to a culture that revolves around a central set of supposedly universal principles or beliefs" (Wolfreys 302).

**Metaphysics of Presence:** "beliefs including binary oppositions, logocentrism, and phonocentrism that have been the basis of Western philosophy since Plato" (Dobie 155).

**Slippage:** The apparent bond between signifier and signified (terms from linguistics/structuralism) is not stable, but is always in the process of disengaging. There is always slippage between signifier and signified (referred to by the term *différance*).

**Trace:** "Meaning seems to reside in words (or in things) only when we distinguish their difference from other words (or things). For example, if we believed that all objects were the same color, we wouldn't need the word red (or blue or green) at all. Red is red only because we believe it to be different from blue and green (and because we believe color to be different from shape). So the word red carries with it the trace of all the signifiers it is not (for it is in contrast to other signifiers that we define it)" (245). Tyson's explanation helps explain what Derrida means when he states "the trace itself does not exist."

**Transcendental Signifier: a** term introduced by Derrida who "asserts that from the time of Plato to the present, Western culture has been founded on a classic, fundamental error: the searching for a transcendental signified, an external point of reference on which one may build a concept or philosophy. Once found, this transcendental signified would provide ultimate meaning. It would guarantee a 'center' of meaning...." (287).
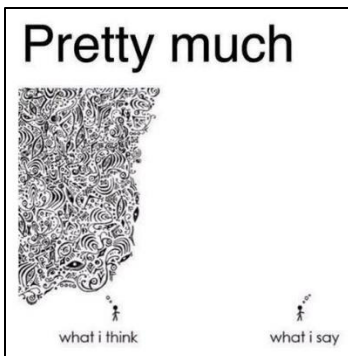
# Feminism(s)

Feminism is a way of analyzing the position of women in society. It critiques the ways in which representations of gender produce, transform, and transcend social stereotypes about women and men. In this critical approach, one examines why certain cultural behaviors are gendered and how that labeling has been limiting and/or empowering to women and men in society. A few tendencies have developed in feminist literary theory since the end of the 1960s: the first publications focused primarily on what is specifically female (protagonist, author, canon), followed by the poetic-aesthetic theories based on gender difference (*écriture feminine*). The latest development is toward a comprehensive view of the importance of both "genders" in literary production and reception.
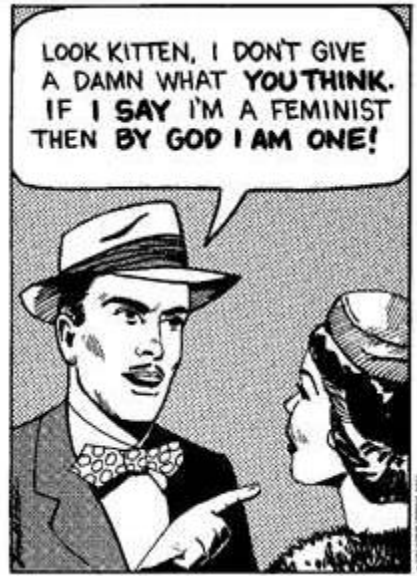


## *How they think:*

1. Language, institutions, and social power structures have reflected patriarchal interests throughout much of history; and this has had a profound impact on women's ability to express themselves and the quality of their daily lives.

2. Yet women have resisted and subverted patriarchal oppression in a variety of ways.

3. This combination of patriarchal oppression and women's resistance to it is apparent in many literary and other cultural texts.

4. For some feminists, the most important way to resist patriarchy is to challenge laws and other institutional barriers to women's equality.

5. For more essentialist feminists, resistance often means focusing on differences between men and women as well as ensuring the social valuation and expression of the latter's unique abilities.

6. For feminists interested in issues of race and ethnicity, both sexism and racism demand analysis in literary and other cultural texts.

7. For materialist feminists, resistance to patriarchy must include thorough questioning of the class system as well as the gender system.

8. For post-structuralist feminists, man/woman is a hierarchical binary pair that may be challenged through intense critical scrutiny. This may include an exploration of prelinguistic experiences of essential femininity or attention to the performativity of gender.

## *What they do:*

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.

2. Revalue women's experience.

3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.

4. Challenge representations of women as "Other," as "lack," as part of "nature."

5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.

6. Recognize the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and "natural."

7. Raise the question of whether men and women are "essentially" different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.

8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *ecriture feminine*, and whether this is also available to men.

9. "Re-read" psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.

10. Question the popular notion of the death of the author, asking whether there are only "subject positions ... constructed in discourse," or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g., of a black or lesbian writer) is central.

11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly "neutral" or "mainstream" literary interpretations.

## Questions they ask:

- What does the text reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy? How are women portrayed? How do these portrayals relate to the gender issues of the period in which the text was written or is set? Does the text reinforce or undermine a patriarchal ideology?

- What does the text suggest about the ways in which race, class, and/or other cultural factors intersect with gender in producing women's experiences?

- How is the text "gendered"? How does it seem to define femininity and masculinity? Do characters' behaviors always conform to their assigned genders? What seems to be the attitude of the text toward the gender it portrays? Does the text seem to accept, question, or reject the traditional view of gender?

- What does the history of the reception of the text by the public and by the critics tell us about the operations of patriarchy? Has the literary text been ignored or neglected in the past? Why? Or, if recognized in the past, is the text ignored or neglected now? Why?

- What role does the text play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition?



WE CAN DO IT

NO MORE MEN

DON'T GET THEM CONFUSED

FEMINIST

MAN-HATER

## Key Terms:

**Écriture feminine:** literally "women's writing," that promotes women's experiences and feelings to the point that it strengthens the work. Hélène Cixous first uses this term, asserts, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. *Écriture féminine* places experience before language, and privileges the anti-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society."

**Gynocentrics:** "the process of constructing 'a female framework for analysis of women's literature [in order] to develop new models [of interpretation] based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt to male models and theories'" (Bressler 269).

**Jouissance:** a term most commonly associated with Helene Cixous, whose use of the word may have derived from Jacques Lacan. "Cixous follows Lacan's psychoanalytic paradigm, which argues that a child must separate from its mother's body (the Real) in order to enter into the Symbolic. Because of this, Cixous says, the female body in general becomes unrepresentable in language; it's what can't be spoken or written in the phallologocentric Symbolic order. Cixous here makes a leap from the maternal body to the female body in general; she also leaps from that female body to female sexuality, saying that female sexuality, female sexual pleasure, feminine *jouissance*, is unrepresentable within the phallogocentric Symbolic order" (Klages).

**Patriarchy:** Male-dominated structures and social arrangements elaborate the oppression of women. Patriarchy almost by definition also exhibits androcentrism, meaning male-centeredness. Coupled with patriarchy, androcentrism assumes that male norms operate throughout all social institutions and become the standard to which all adhere.

**Phallologocentrism:** language ordered around an absolute Word (logos) which is "masculine" [phallic], systematically excludes, disqualifies, denigrates, diminishes, silences the "feminine" (Nikita Dhawan).

**Second- and Third-Wave feminisms:** Second-wave feminism refers to a period of feminist thought that originated around the 1960s and was mainly concerned with independence and greater political action to improve women's rights. Third-wave feminism arguably began in the early 1990s. Unlike second-wave feminism, which largely focused on the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated areas, third-wave feminism seeks to challenge and expand common definitions of gender and sexuality, while also addressing matters of race and class.



Cyanide and Happiness © Explosm.net
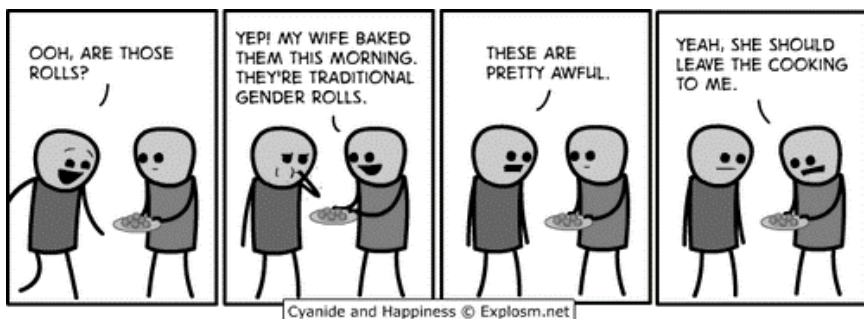
# New Historicism / Cultural Studies

Fundamentally, texts come out of a particular historical moment and a particular culture. All texts reflect that within themselves. The best not only reflect their historical and cultural contexts, but also move those contexts.

New historicism takes an approach like that of the poststructuralist schools, by including non-literary phenomena in the definition of "text" and thus treating historical phenomena as it would literary ones.

Cultural Studies deliberately analyzes the different aspects of human self-expression,



THE CULTURAL ICEBERG

Food
Music   Games
Holidays   Fashion
Dances   Language
Festival   Literature

SURFACE CULTURE

DEEP CULTURE

**Communications Styles and Rules:**
Facial Expressions   Body Language
Eye Contact   Personal Space   Gestures
Handling and Displaying of Emotion

**Notions of:**
Courtesy and Manners
Friendship   Leadership
Beauty

**Concepts of:**
Time   Family   Self
Past and Future
Fairness and Justice

**Attitudes toward:**
Senior Citizens   Children
Rules   Work   Age
Cooperation vs. Competition
Authority   Animals
Death

**Approaches to:**
Religion   Courtship
Raising Children   Marriage
Decision-Making
Problem Solving

including the visual arts, film, TV, commercials, fashion, architecture, music, popular culture, etc. as manifestations of a historically- and geographically-conditioned cultural whole. In contrast to semiotics, which is equally interested in non-literary phenomena from a text-oriented, structuralist approach, cultural studies adopts a comprehensive perspective which attempts to grasp culture's multi-faceted nature.
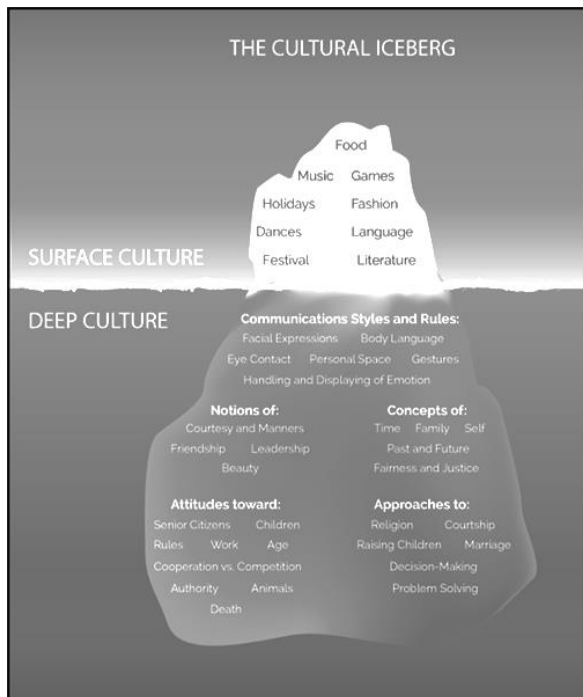
## *How they think:*

1. History is not linearly progressive and is not reducible to the activities of prominent individuals.
2. The mundane activities and conditions of everyday life can tell us much about the belief systems of a time period.
3. Literary and other cultural texts are connected in complex ways to the time period in which they were created. Systems of social power are both reflected in and reinforced by such texts.
4. Many different types of cultural texts can reflect and advance social interests.
5. A synthetic methodology or pluralistic approach still requires both precision and unity.
6. No reading of a literary or other cultural text is definitive.

## *What they do:*

1. They juxtapose literary and non-literary texts, reading the former in the light of the latter.
2. They try thereby to "defamiliarize" the canonical literary text, detaching it from the accumulated weight of previous literary scholarship and seeing it as if new.

3. They focus attention (within both text and co-text) on issues of power and how it is maintained, on patriarchal structures and their perpetuation, and on the process of colonization, with its accompanying "mind-set."

4. They make use, in doing so, of aspects of the post-structuralist outlook, especially Derrida's notion that every facet of reality is textualized, and Foucault's idea of social structures as determined by dominant "discursive practices."

## Questions they ask:

- What language/characters/events present in the text reflect the current events of the time of its production?

- How are such events interpreted and presented?

- How are the presentation and the interpretation of these events a product of the culture of the author?

- Does the presentation of these events support or condemn the events?

- Can the text do both?

- How does this portrayal criticize the leading political figures or movements of the day?

- How does the literary text function as part of a continuum with other historical or cultural texts from the same period?

- How can the text "map" the interplay of both traditional and subversive discourses circulating in the culture in which the emerged and/or the cultures in which the text has been interpreted?

- How does the text consider traditionally marginalized populations?

### Bonus: What (Renaissance) New Historians/Cultural Studies Critics do:

1. They read the literary text (very often a Renaissance play) in such a way as to enable us to "recover its histories." That is, the context of exploitation from which it emerged.

2. At the same time, they foreground those elements in the work's present transmission and contextualizing which caused those histories to be lost in the first place, (for example, the "heritage" industry's packaging of Shakespeare in terms of history-as-pageant, national bard, cultural icon, and so on).

3. They use a combination of Marxist and feminist approaches to the text, especially in order to do the first of these (above), and in order to fracture the previous dominance of conservative social, political, and religious assumptions in Shakespeare criticism in particular.

4. They use the technique of close textual analysis, but often employ structuralist and post-structuralist techniques, especially to mark a break with the inherited tradition of close textual analysis within the framework of conservative cultural and social assumptions.

5. At the same time, they work mainly within traditional notions of the canon, on the grounds that writing about more obscure texts hardly ever constitutes an effective

political intervention (for instance, in debates about the school curriculum or national identity

## Key Terms:

**Discourse:** "defined by Michel Foucault as 'language practice'; language as it is used by various constituencies (the law, medicine, the church, for example) for purposes to do with power relationships between people" (Wolfreys).

**Episteme:** "a particular group of knowledges and discourses which operate in concert as the dominant discourses in any given historical period. [Foucault] also identifies epistemic breaks, radical shifts in the varieties and deployments of knowledge for ideological purposes, which take place from period to period" (Wolfreys).

**Power:** "in the work of Foucault, power constitutes one of the three axes constitutive of subjectification, the other two being ethics and truth. For Foucault, power implies knowledge, even while knowledge is, concomitantly, constitutive of power: knowledge gives one power, but one has the power in given circumstances to constitute bodies of knowledge, discourses and so on as valid or invalid, truthful or untruthful. Power serves in making the world both knowable and controllable. Yet, in the nature of power, as Foucault suggests in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, is essentially proscriptive, concerned more with imposing limits on its subjects" (Wolfreys).

**Self-positioning:** "new historicism's claim that historical analysis is unavoidably subjective is not an attempt to legitimize a self-indulgent, 'anything goes' attitude toward the writing of history. Rather, the inevitability of personal bias makes it imperative that new historicists be aware of and as forthright as possible about their own psychological and ideological positions relative to the material they analyze so that their readers can have some idea of the human 'lens' through which they are viewing the historical issues at hand" (Tyson).

**Thick description:** the seemingly insignificant details present in any cultural practice. By focusing on these details, one can then reveal the inherent contradictory forces at work within culture.
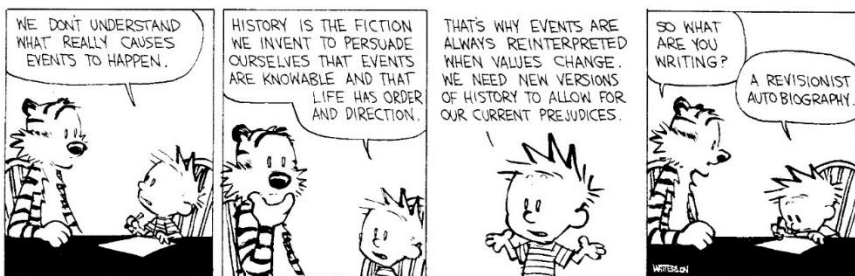
# Marxism/ Cultural Materialism/ Historical Materialism

Marx witnessed the capitalism of the early Industrial Revolution, in which privately-owned industries competed for profit with few or no government rules to protect workers or consumers. Such capitalist systems create a class struggle between the rich factory owners (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat). The unavoidable result of this class struggle is a workers' revolt

CAPITALISM

WE RULE YOU

WE FOOL YOU

WE SHOOT AT YOU

WE EAT FOR YOU

WE WORK FOR ALL

WE FEED ALL

**PYRAMID OF THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM**

against the owners. Marx encouraged the workers of the world to rise up as a class and defeat the wealthy capitalists who were exploiting them. He believed that the workers, once in power, would create a new economic system—socialism—in which resources would be distributed equally by the government to create a classless society. This society, focused on cooperation and sharing, would allow people to work for equality rather than personal greed or profit.

Cultural materialism is a theoretical framework and research method for examining the relationships between the physical and economic aspects of production and built society, social organization and social relations, and the predominant values, beliefs, and worldviews in that society.

This sociological approach to literature views works of literature or art as the products of historical forces that can be analyzed by looking at the material conditions in which they were formed. In Marxist ideology, what we often classify as a world view (such as the Victorian age) is actually the articulations of the dominant class. Marxism generally focuses on the clash between the dominant and repressed classes in any given age, and also may encourage art to imitate what is often termed an "objective" reality. Contemporary Marxism is much broader in its focus, and views art as simultaneously reflective and autonomous to the age in which it was produced.
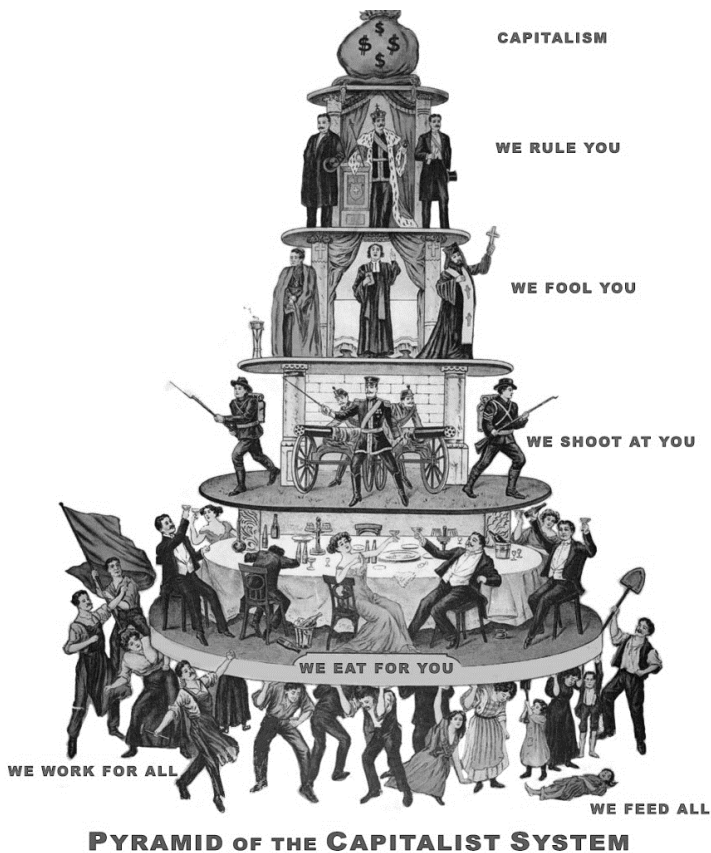
## How they think:

1. An attention to the material conditions of life and a critical engagement with our attitudes about those conditions are essential for achieving positive social change.

2. The traditional social structure of classes, within and around texts, is built on the oppression of workers.

3. Social classes, within and around texts, ultimately have conflicting interests, even if they share certain beliefs at certain times.

4. Literary texts, like other cultural productions, are ideological in background, form, and function.

5. The production and consumption of texts reflects class ideologies.

6. Representations within texts reflect class ideologies.

7. The production, consumption, and content of literary and cultural criticism are also ideological in nature.

8. A key role of the critic is to uncover the underpinning ideology of the culture which produced the text (and which it reflects) in order to further class awareness and positive social change.

## What they do:

1. They make a division between the "overt" (manifest or surface) and "covert" (latent or hidden) content of a literary work (much as psychoanalytic critics do) and then relate the *covert* subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, or the progression of society through various historical stages, such as, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Thus, the conflicts in *King Lear* might be read as being "really" about the conflict of class interest between the rising class (the bourgeoisie) and the falling class (the feudal overlords).

2. They relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author. In such cases an assumption is made (which again is similar to those made by psychoanalytic critics) that the author is unaware of precisely what he or she is saying or revealing in the text.

3. They explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which "produced" it. For instance, *The Rise of the Novel* (by Ian Watt), relates the growth of the novel in the 18th century to the expansion of the middle classes during that period. The novel "speaks" for this social class, just as, for instance, tragedy "speaks for" the monarchy and the nobility, and the ballad "speaks for" for the rural and semi-urban "working class."

4. They relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is "consumed," a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism, cultural materialism.

5. They "politicize the literary form." They claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance. For instance, in the view of some critics, literary realism carries with it an implicit validation of conservative social structures; for others, the formal and metrical intricacies of the sonnet and the use of iambic pentameter are a counterpart of social stability, decorum, and order.

## Questions they ask:

- Does the text reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values? If so, then the text may be said to have a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda, and it is the critic's job to expose and condemn this aspect of the text.

- How might the text be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? In what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive forces? If a text criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have a Marxist agenda.

- How does the literary text reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it was set? What do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle? What values does the text reinforce? What values does it subvert?

- How might the text be seen as a critique of other institutional structures (e.g., the military-industrial complex, organized religion, etc.)? How do these structures function in the text to keep a character or characters from realizing and resisting socioeconomic forces?

- Who benefits if the text or effort is accepted/successful/believed, etc.?

## Key Terms:

**Bourgeoisie:** The name given by Marx to the owners of the means of production in a society.

**Commodification:** The attitude of valuing things not for their utility but for their power to impress others or for their resale possibilities.

**Conspicuous Consumption:** The obvious acquisition of things only for their sign value and/or exchange value.

**Dialectical Materialism:** The theory that history develops neither in a random fashion nor in a linear one but instead as struggle between contradictions that ultimately find resolution in a synthesis of the two sides. For example, class conflicts lead to new social systems.

**Exchange Value:** An assessment of the worth of something based on what it can be traded or sold for.

**False Consciousness:** People's acceptance of an unfavorable social system without protest or questioning, that is, as the logical way for things to be.

**Hegemony:** The processes by which dominant culture maintains its dominant position: for example, the use of institutions to formalize power; the employment of a bureaucracy to make power seem abstract (and, therefore, not attached to any one individual); the inculcation of the populace in the ideals of the hegemonic group through education, advertising, publication, etc.; the mobilization of a police force as well as military personnel to subdue opposition.

**Historical Situation:** The ideological atmosphere generated by material circumstances. To understand social events, one must have a grasp of the material circumstances and the historical situation in which they occur.

**Ideology:** A belief system.

**Interpellation:** The process by which the working class is manipulated to accept the ideology of the dominant class (Althusser coined this term).

**Material Circumstances:** The economic conditions underlying the society. To understand social events, one must have a grasp of the material circumstances and the historical situation in which they occur.

**Proletariat:** the class of wage-earners (especially industrial workers) in a capitalist society whose only possession of significant material value is their ability to work).

**Social Murder:** Murder committed by the political and social elite where they knowingly permit conditions to exist where the poorest and most vulnerable in society are deprived of the necessities of life and are placed in a position in which they reasonably cannot be expected to live and will inevitably meet an early and unnatural death.
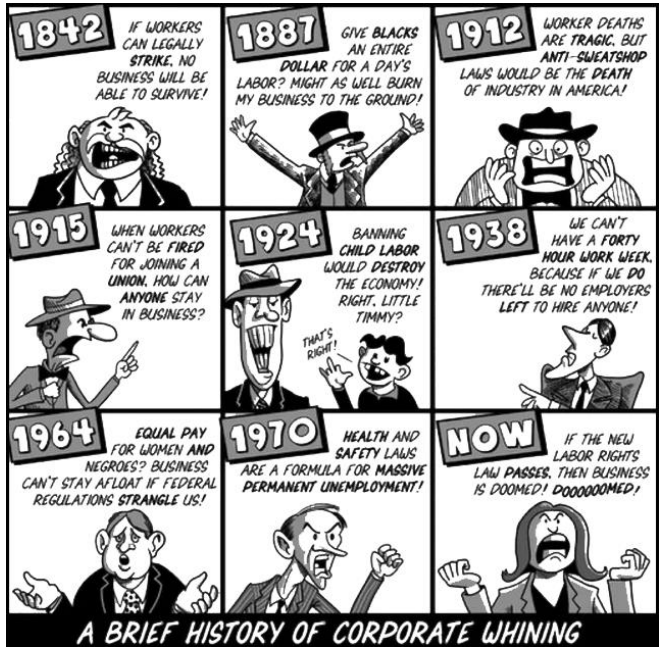
## Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society. Institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture. This is the analytical lens that CRT uses in examining the intersection of race, law, and power. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color. CRT also rejects the traditions of liberalism and meritocracy. Legal discourse says that the law is neutral and colorblind; however, CRT challenges this legal "truth" by examining liberalism and meritocracy as a vehicle for self-interest, power, and privilege. CRT also recognizes that liberalism and meritocracy are often stories heard from those with wealth, power, and privilege. These stories paint a false picture of meritocracy.
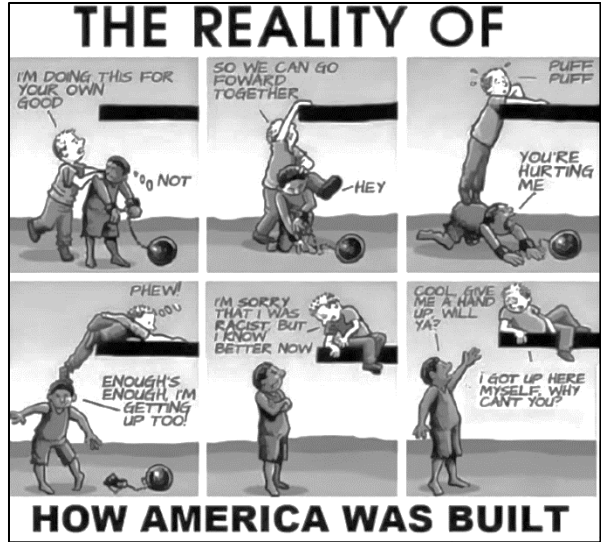


CRT considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, CRT questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.

## *How they think:*

1. Everyday racism is a common, ordinary experience for people of color in the U.S.

2. Racism is largely the result of interest convergence, sometimes called "material determinism."

3. Race is socially constructed.

4. Racism often takes the form of differential racialization.

5. Everyone's identity is a product of intersectionality.

6. The experiences of racial minorities have given them what might be called a unique voice of color.

7. Categories of race and ethnicity have been used in ways that have empowered and oppressed.

8. This differentiation of peoples is reflected in and reinforced by languages and metaphor.

9. The forces of economic greed and expansionism, along with this differentiation of peoples, are also reflected in a centuries-long history of imperialism, colonization, and neo-colonialism.

10. This differentiation of peoples and its political consequences are reflected not only in the literary and other forms of representation but also in our very notion of literature.

11. An understanding of textual reflections of racism and ethnocentrism demands an attention to the cultural history and belief systems of the social group(s) being portrayed and discussed.

12. The analysis of racism and ethnocentrism in texts from the past may have relevance to the ways we live our lives today.

13. Textual analysis of the matters of race, ethnicity, colonialism, and neo-colonialism can serve as a starting point for positive forms of social change in the future.

## What they do:

1. They fight to overturn laws that support systemic and institutional racism.

2. They work to disassemble social institutions that marginalize groups based on identity.

3. They seek to make people aware of their privilege or lack of privilege.

## Questions they ask:

- What can the text teach us about the specifics of African heritage, African American culture and experience, and/or African American history (including but not limited to the history of marginalization)?

- What are the racial politics (ideological agendas related to racial oppression or liberation) of specific African American texts? For example, does the text correct stereotypes of African Americans; correct historical misrepresentations of African Americans; celebrate African American culture, experience, and achievement; or explore racial issues, including, among others, the economic, social, or psychological effects of racism? Or as can be seen in the literary production of many white authors, does the text reinforce racist ideologies?

- What are the poetics (literary devices and strategies) of specific African American texts? For example, does the text use black vernacular or standard white English? Does the text draw on African myths or African American folktales or folk motifs? Does the text provide imagery that resonates with African American women's domestic space, African American cultural practices, history, or heritage? What are the effects of these literary devices and how do they relate to the theme, or meaning, of the text?

- How does the text participate in the African American literary tradition? To what group of African American texts might we say it belongs in terms of its politics and poetics? How does it conform to those texts? How does it break with them, perhaps seeking to redefine literary aesthetics by experimenting with new forms? In short, what place does it occupy in African American literary history or in African American women's literary history?

- How does the text illustrate interesting convergences, the social construction of race, white privilege, or any other concept from critical race theory? How can an understanding of these concepts deepen our interpretation of the text?

- How is an Africanist presence—black characters, stories about black people, representations of black speech, images associated with Africa or with blackness— used in texts by white writers to construct positive portrayals of white characters?

## Key Terms:

**Critical Social Justice (CSJ):** An ideology that aggressively pursues the social, cultural, institutional, and political installation and enforcement of a very specific and radical understanding of social justice. CSJ sees people in terms of their social group membership (black, white, gay, etc.), examines the relationship of those social groups to societal power and privilege, and looks for the ways those intersect in a "matrix" of domination, oppression, and marginalization that promotes the interests of the dominant while excluding or harming everyone else.

**Colorism:** Prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.

**Critical Self-Awareness/ Self-Reflection:** The act of becoming aware of one's presuppositions and challenging established patterns of thinking, observing the conditionings that shape beliefs, thoughts, and actions. This is done entirely in terms of challenging any thoughts or beliefs not sufficiently in line with CSJ. To be Critically Self-Aware is to be critically aware of one's own self—one's actions, thoughts, and emotions in terms of CSJ

**Cultural Appropriation/Misappropriation:** The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one culture by members of another culture that is more dominant in society. The idea is that all cultural practices, including music, language, games, clothing, food, and others are property of the culture which produced them; anyone from a more powerful culture who uses cultural practices from another culture and becomes popular, or makes money, is generally seen to be stealing another group's culture. Though there may be egregious examples that can often border on racist or prejudicial, this concept is often applied to the most innocuous displays of fashion, musical preference, hairstyle, etc.

**Dominant Discourses:** The "dominant discourse" is that which socially conditions people and socializes them into a particular way of thinking. The "dominant discourse" is also seen as the way in which certain ideas become powerful and elevate certain ideologies to become dominant in society. In practice, the idea contained in that discourse shapes the way a conversation or debate can go in a way that benefits the ideology that is embedded in the dominant discourse.

**Unconscious/Implicit/Explicit Bias:** An inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment. All forms of bias can be both explicit (aware, voluntary, and intentional) and implicit (unaware, involuntary, and unintentional), though explicit biases are more overt expressions of prejudice or hate. All manifestations of bias and discrimination can be both personal (an individual act of bias, meanness, or exclusion) or institutional (supported and sanctioned by power and authority that confers privilege on members of a dominant group while disadvantaging members of other groups).

**Institutional Oppression:** This refers to the mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by institutions, solely based on the person's membership in the social identity group.

**Internalized Racism:** Members of a racial group that is oppressed in a society that is systemically racist, or individuals in that group, who still support the supremacy and dominance of the groups oppressing them.

**Intersectionality:** The interconnected nature of traits considered to be social categorizations (as opposed to the immutable nature of characteristics or traits) such as race, class, ability, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

**Marginalized/Minoritized/Under-represented Communities:** Communities composed of people with marginalized identities who are seen to have less opportunity than the dominant majority.

**Microaggressions:** The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their membership in a marginalized group.

**Privilege:** Benefits that belong to people because they fit into a specific social group or have certain dimensions to their identity. One can have (or lack) privilege because of one's race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, wealth, and class, among many other characteristics. Privilege and the lack of privilege are how power is distributed.

**Structural Bias:** The institutional patterns and practices that confer advantages to some and disadvantages to others based on identity. It is not merely the institutions themselves but the way that institutions are structured and relate to each other and society.

**Systemic Bias:** A social phenomenon based on the perceived and real differences among social groups that involves ideological domination, institutional control, and the promulgation of the oppressor's ideology, logic system, and culture.

# Postcolonialism / Transnationalism

Postcolonial critics are concerned with the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies, both how European nations conquered and controlled "Third World" cultures and how these groups have since responded to and resisted those encroachments. Postcolonialism, as both a body of theory and a study of political and cultural change, can be grouped into three broad stages: (1) an initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority enforced by being in a colonized state; (2) the struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy; and (3) a growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity. Postcolonial writers critically or subversively scrutinize the colonial relationship, or attempt to resist colonialist perspectives. It demands a change in power, a symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings.



Look at all these countries I used to own

Transnationalism continues the Postcolonial Studies project. It grows out of a recognition of the heightened interconnectivity between people and the receding economic and social significance of boundaries among nation-states. It is closely connected with the issues of globalization, migration, diaspora studies, and neo-colonialism (the geopolitical practice of using capitalism, business globalization, and cultural imperialism to influence a country, in lieu of either direct military control or indirect political control, i.e., imperialism and hegemony).

## *How they think:*

1. Colonialism is a powerful, usually destructive historical force that shapes not only the political futures of the countries involved but also the identities of colonized and colonizing people.
2. Colonialism creates a binary worldview, and depends on a process of "Othering" the people colonized. The Other is always fundamentally different from the colonizer: wild, emotional, inferior, backward, and powerless.
3. Because of this, literature written in colonizing cultures often distorts the experiences and realities of colonized people. Literature written by colonized people often includes attempts to articulate more empowered identities and reclaim cultures in the face of colonization.

## *What they do:*

1. They reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathize across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference.
2. They examine the representation of other cultures in literature as a way of achieving this end.



1791: HAITIAN SLAVES ASK VERY NICELY TO BE FREED AND ARE IMMEDIATELY LIBERATED BY ALL THOSE REASONABLE WHITE PEOPLE.

3. They show how such literature is often evasively and crucially silent on matters surrounding colonization and imperialism.
4. They foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in relevant literary works.
5. They celebrate hybridity and "cultural polyvalency," that is, the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture (for instance, that of the colonizer, through a colonial school system, and that of the colonized, through local and oral traditions).
6. They develop a perspective, not just applicable to postcolonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived "Otherness" are seen as sources of energy and potential change.

## *Questions they ask:*

- How does the text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression?

- What does the text reveal about the problems of creating and living a postcolonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?

- What person(s) or groups does the text identify as the "other" or stranger? How are such persons/groups described and treated?

- What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anti-colonial resistance?

- What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference—the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity—in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?

- How does the text respond to or comment upon the characters, themes, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) text?

- Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different postcolonial populations?

- How does a literary text in the Western canon reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of colonization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples?

## *Key Terms:*

**Alterity:** a lack of identification with some part of one's personality or one's community, differentness, otherness.

**Cultural heterogenization:** the attempt to maintain the traits and integrity of an "initial" culture. It opposes Cultural homogenization.

**Cultural homogenization:** the emulation or acculturation within a particular cultural towards a multitude of foreign influences. It opposes Cultural heterogenization.

**Diaspora:** Any people or ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands, being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture.

**Eurocentrism:** Placing emphasis on European (and, generally, Western) concerns, culture and values at the expense of those of other cultures. Relevant because of its alignment with current and past real power structures in the world.

**Globalization:** the accelerating interdependence of nations in a world system linked economically and through mass media and modern transportation systems.

**Hybridity:** the integration of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures. A variety of stratagems (desperate or cunning or good-willed) by which people adapt themselves to the necessities and opportunities of more or less oppressive or invasive cultural impositions. The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, which can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as oppressive (John Lye).

**Imperialism:** the policy of extending the control or authority over foreign entities as a means of acquisition and/or maintenance of empires, either through direct territorial control or through indirect methods of exerting control on the politics and/or economy of other countries. The policy of a country in maintaining colonies and dominance over distant lands, regardless of whether the country calls itself an empire.

**Mimicry:** the attempt of the colonized subject to imitate the colonizer. It can never be successful, whether because of racial markers, cultural backgrounds, or educational systems. However, this mimicry is a tool of the colonized, because on the surface it appears, as Bhabha states, to be "almost but not quite."

**Orientalism:** Originally this was used by art historians and literary and cultural studies scholars for the imitation or depiction of aspects of Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures by writers, designers and artists from the West. Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, the term has come to refer to a general patronizing Western attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies. For Said, the West essentializes these societies as static and undeveloped—thereby creating a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced. Implicit in this fabrication is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior.

# Queer Studies/Queer Theory

Queer studies, or Sexual Diversity Studies, or LGBT studies, is the study of issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity usually focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex people and cultures. (The acronym has trended in various directions: LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI, GBLT, etc.)

Originally centered on LGBT history and literary theory, the field has expanded to include the academic study of issues raised in biology, sociology, anthropology, the history of science, philosophy, psychology, sexology, political science, ethics, and other fields by an examination of the identity, lives, history, and perception of queer people. Marianne LaFrance, the former chair of the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University, says, "Now we're asking not just 'What causes homosexuality?' [but also] 'What causes heterosexuality?' and 'Why is sexuality so central in some people's perspective?'"

Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorization of "queerness" itself. It builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially-constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Whereas gay/lesbian studies focuses its inquiries into natural and unnatural behavior with respect to homosexual behavior, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories.

Queer theory focuses on "mismatches" between sex, gender, and desire. Queer has been associated most prominently with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects, but the analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, intersexuality, gender ambiguity, and gender-corrective surgery. Queer theory's attempted debunking of stable (and correlated) sexes, genders, and sexualities develops out of the specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Queer theory examines the constitutive discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place "queer" in its historical context, and surveys contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology.

## *How they think:*

1. Even though sexuality is often considered a highly private matter, it is thoroughly connected to our social existence.

2. Negative social attitudes about expressions of sexual desire between members of the same sex have had a profound impact on many individuals' public and private lives.
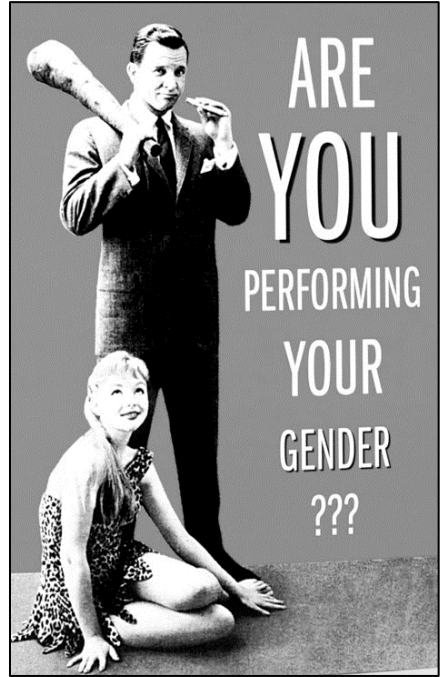
3. Social attitudes about sexuality have changed dramatically over time.

4. Social attitudes about sexuality have differed significantly for men and women.

5. Social attitudes about sexuality have differed significantly across cultures, regions, classes, and ethnic groups.

6. All notions of "normality"—sexual, gender-related, and otherwise—are culturally conditioned, and thus appropriate subjects for critique and historical investigation.

7. Social attitudes about sexuality resonate through literary and other cultural texts.

8. Social attitudes about sexuality may be seen in the themes of literary and other cultural texts and characterizations in literary and other cultural texts.

9. Explorations of the interrelationship of sexuality and textuality may draw on different theories, such as those concerning class, race, psychology, and form, and as well as those of post-structuralism and New Historicism.

## What they do:

1. Identify and establish a canon of "classic" lesbian/gay writers whose work constitutes a distinct tradition.

2. Identify lesbian/gay episodes in mainstream work and discuss them as such (for example, the relationship between Jane and Helen in *Jane Eyre),* rather than reading same-sex pairings in non-specific ways, for instance, as symbolizing two aspects of the same character.

3. Set up an extended, metaphorical sense of "lesbian/gay" so that it connotes a moment of crossing a boundary, or blurring a set of categories. All such 'liminal' moments mirror the moment of self-identification as lesbian or gay, which is necessarily an act of conscious resistance to established norms and boundaries.

4. Expose the "homophobia" of mainstream literature and criticism, as seen in ignoring or denigrating the homosexual aspects of the work of major canonical figures, e.g., by omitting overtly homosexual love lyrics from selections or discussions of the poetry of W. H. Auden.

5. Foreground homosexual aspects of mainstream literature which have previously been glossed over, e.g., the strongly homo-erotic tenderness seen in a good deal of WWI poetry.

6. Foreground literary genres, previously neglected, which significantly influenced ideals of masculinity or femininity, e.g., 19th-century adventure stories with a British "Empire" setting.

## Questions they ask:

- What elements of the text can be perceived as being masculine (active, powerful) and feminine (passive, marginalized), and how do the characters support these traditional roles?

- What sort of support (if any) is given to elements or characters who question the masculine/feminine binary? What happens to those elements/characters?

- What elements in the text exist in the middle, between the perceived masculine/feminine binary? In other words, what elements exhibit traits of both (bisexual)?

- How does the author present the text? Is it a traditional narrative? Is it secure and forceful? Or is it more hesitant or even collaborative?

- What are the politics (ideological agendas) of specific gay, lesbian, or queer texts, and how are those politics revealed in the thematic content or character portrayals in the text?

- What are the poetics (literary devices and strategies) of a specific lesbian, gay, or queer text?

- What does the text contribute to our knowledge of queer, gay, or lesbian experience and history, including literary history?

- How is queer, gay, or lesbian experience coded in texts that are by writers who are apparently homosexual, but are closeted?

- What does the text reveal about the operations (socially, politically, psychologically) of a homophobic culture?

- How does the literary text illustrate the problems of sexuality and sexual "identity"? Does it reflect the understanding that human sexuality does not fall neatly into the separate categories defined by the words *homosexual* and *heterosexual*?

## Key Terms:

**Gender Identity:** A person's internal, felt sense of being male, female, something other, or in-between. This identity may or may not match the gender that the person was assigned at birth.

**Gender Expression:** A person's characteristics and behaviors (appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns and social interactions) that are perceived as masculine or feminine. Gender expression is not necessarily an indication of gender identity, assigned gender, or sexual orientation.

**Gender Performativity:** The stylized repetition of acts, an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender.

**Heteronormativity** A cultural privileging of heterosexuality, bestowing on its sexual practice a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy.

**Sexual Orientation:** A person's emotional and sexual attraction to other people, often based on the gender of the other person. This is separate from gender identity.
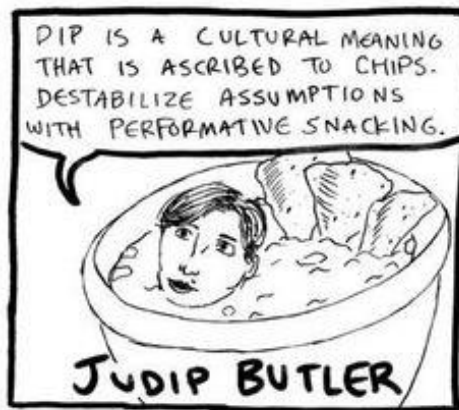
# Ecocriticism

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.
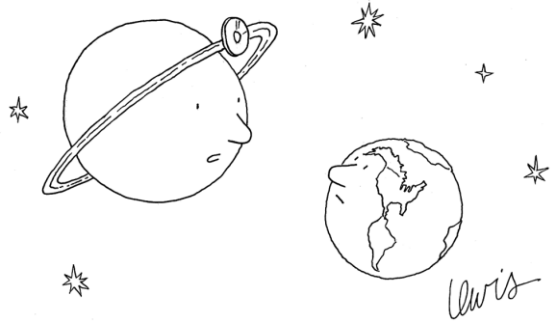


*"I'm afraid you have humans."*

## How they think:

1. All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Thus it concentrates on the "literature of place."

2. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature.

3. Ecocriticism negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

4. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere.

5. The theory and practice of ecocriticism is inherently political. It seeks to make students and the general public more sensitive towards and knowledgeable about the places in which they live.

6. Ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary.

7. Fieldwork on the part of scholars and students can improve the practice of ecocriticism.

## What they do:

1. Ecocritics seek to move from the community of literature to the larger biospheric community which ecology tells us … we belong to even as we are destroying it?

2. Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place. Landscape, by definition, includes the non-human elements of place—the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air—as well as human perceptions and modifications. How an author sees and describes these elements relates to geological, botanical, zoological, meteorological, ecological, as well as aesthetic, social, and psychological, considerations. And then there is the historical vantage point.

3. Like anthropologists, they engage in fieldwork; where their informant is the land itself. Outdoor education goes hand-in-hand with ecocriticism because are thus made aware, again and again, that the earth was not made for humans alone.

4. Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place. Landscape by definition includes the non-human elements of place--the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air--as well as human perceptions and modifications. How an author sees and describes these elements relates to geological, botanical, zoological, meteorological, ecological, as well as aesthetic, social, and psychological, considerations. And then there is the historical vantage point. As Thoreau once wrote, there can be no history but natural history--if one believes that by "nature" we mean the human as well as non-human world.

5. The first method of ecocritical analysis is the ecocritical re-reading of representations of nature in the canonized literature.

6. Another method in this analysis looks at the representation of pure nature and humanity's experience of the wilderness reflected in books.

7. The third method of ecocriticism offers an analysis based on co-operation with other theories in literary studies, and also with philosophy, feminism, ecology, ontology, etc.

8. The fourth method is the discussion of literary texts by using ecological terminology.

## Questions they ask:

- How is nature represented in this text?

- What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this text?

- Are the values expressed in this text consistent with ecological wisdom?

- How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?

- How can we characterize nature writing as a genre?

- In addition to race, class, and gender, should "place" become a new critical category?

- Do men write about nature differently than women do?

- In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world?

- How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?

- In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis present in contemporary literature and popular culture?

- What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect?

- What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies?

- How is science itself open to literary analysis?

- What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?

## Key Terms:

**Androcentric:** system of beliefs and practices that favors men over women.

**Animism:** belief that natural objects and phenomena have spirits.

**Anthropocentrism:** system of beliefs and practices that favors humans over other organisms.

**Anthropogenic:** caused by humans.

**Carrying capacity:** maximum number of organisms of a certain kind that an ecosystem can support. Sometimes dubiously applied to human populations.



LITTLE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

BIKE TO WORK

TRY MEATLESS MONDAYS

GUILLOTINE THE CORRUPT CORPORATE CLASS THAT IS POISONING THE PLANET FOR PROFIT

RECYCLE

**Constructionism:** belief that apparently natural phenomena are mainly or wholly enculturated or "socially constructed."

**Dialectic analysis:** pursued by means of incorporation of opposed arguments or perspectives.

**Dualism:** explanation of the world in terms of two opposed terms, e.g. mind/matter, nature/culture.

**Ecocide:** destruction of entire habitats, rather than just individual organisms or species.

**Instrumental value:** possessing value only in relation to human interests, usually narrowly economic.

**Intraspecies:** operating within, rather than between, species.

**Intrinsic value:** possessing value in its own right, without reference to human interests.

**Mechanism:** belief that the world is explicable in terms of mechanical physical laws.

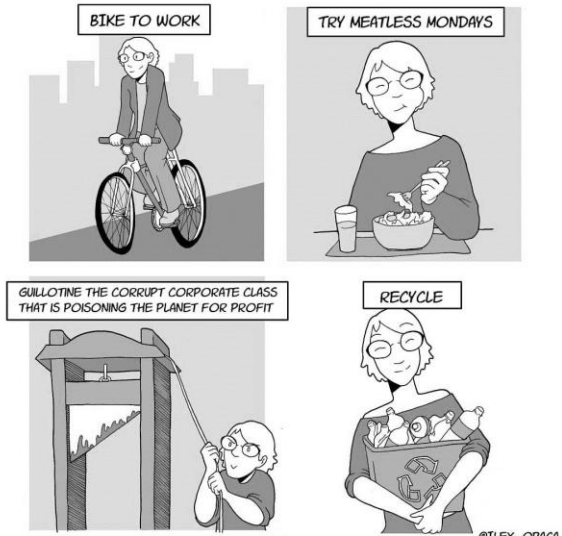**Monism:** explanation of the world using a single, all-encompassing term.

**Normative:** proposing or maintaining a standard or norm.

**Reductionism:** belief that phenomena can be explained in simple, or (by implication) simplistic, terms.
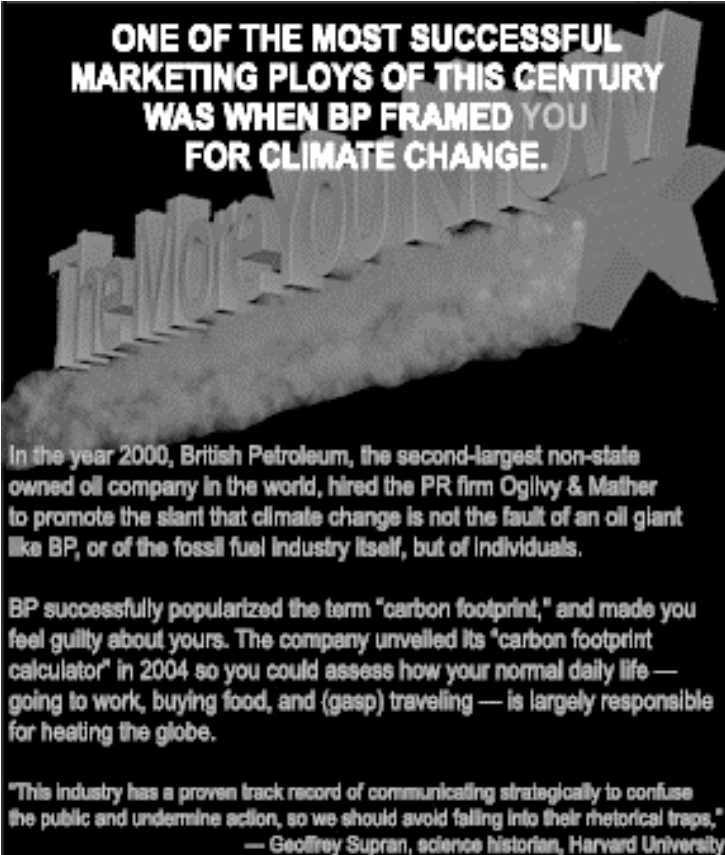
**Speciesism:** prejudice in favor of one's own species.

**Therianthropic:** representation of humans and animals in a single image, usually as a form of caricature.

**Theriomorphic:** representation of humans as animals, usually with satirical purpose.



ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL MARKETING PLOYS OF THIS CENTURY WAS WHEN BP FRAMED YOU FOR CLIMATE CHANGE.

In the year 2000, British Petroleum, the second-largest non-state owned oil company in the world, hired the PR firm Ogilvy & Mather to promote the slant that climate change is not the fault of an oil giant like BP, or of the fossil fuel industry itself, but of individuals.

BP successfully popularized the term "carbon footprint," and made you feel guilty about yours. The company unveiled its "carbon footprint calculator" in 2004 so you could assess how your normal daily life — going to work, buying food, and (gasp) traveling — is largely responsible for heating the globe.

"This industry has a proven track record of communicating strategically to confuse the public and undermine action, so we should avoid falling into their rhetorical traps."
— Geoffrey Supran, science historian, Harvard University

# Disability Studies

Disability Studies refers generally to the examination of disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. In contrast to clinical, medical, or therapeutic perspectives on disability, Disability Studies focuses on how disability is defined and represented in society. From this perspective, disability is not a characteristic that exists in the person so defined, but a construct that finds its meaning in social and cultural context. The field is interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary, informed by scholarship from history, sociology, literature, political science, law, policy studies, economics, cultural studies, anthropology, geography, philosophy, theology, gender studies, communications and media studies, and the arts.

Disability Studies covers an incredibly diverse group of people. People who are blind, deaf, use wheelchairs, have chronic pain, learn at a slower pace than other people, etc., have vastly different experiences and perspectives. Does it make sense to lump such different human beings under a simple category such as disability? It does—not because they are the same in any biological or philosophical sense, but because society has placed them in this category, with consequences for how they are viewed and treated by the majority presumed to be nondisabled.

Disability Studies is not medicine, rehabilitation, special education, physical or occupational therapy, and professions oriented toward the cure, prevention, or treatment of disabilities. Although Disability Studies scholars generally subscribe to the minority group model of disability—the view that the status of people as a minority shapes their experiences in society—they agree on little else. For example, some Disability Studies scholars view disability in terms of culture and identity, while others see disability as a label and a social construct.

## *How they think:*

1. The true significance of disability may be measured by respecting the degree to which people with disabilities exemplify the dynamic variability, vulnerability, and mutability that exist across individuals, populations, cultures, and histories.

2. The "normal" or "able" person is not fully up to speed on the subject of disability. Disability Studies requires a base of knowledge and a familiarity with discursive terms and methodologies, as well as, most often, some personal involvement. The apparent ease of intuitive knowledge of the field is really another aspect of discrimination against people with disabilities.

## *What they do:*

1. Disability Studies reframes the topic of disability by focusing on disability as a social phenomenon, as a social construct, as a metaphor and in fact as a culture.

2. It does this by examining myths and ideas related to disability in all forms of cultural representations and throughout history.

3. Many earlier writers in the field had an anthropological approach, with the weakness and imperial quality of anthropological work, others wrote from the perspective of "having" a disability. That type of work tended to be written so that "normal" people might know what it is like to be blind, crippled, deaf, and so on.

4. They challenge the idea that the economic and social status and the assigned roles of people with disabilities are an inevitable outcome of their impairments, an idea similar to the argument that women's roles and status are biologically determined.

5. They study national and international perspectives, policies, literature, culture, and history with an aim of placing current ideas of disability within their broadest possible context. Since attitudes toward disability have not been the same across times and places, much can be gained by learning from these other experiences.

6. They look toward feminist, Marxist, postmodern, and cultural studies models for understanding the relation between the body and power.

7. They provide a more complex view of many critical social issues: competence, wholeness, independence/dependence, autonomy, health, physical appearance, aesthetics, and community, which pervade every aspect of the civic and pedagogical culture.

## *Questions they ask:*

- Who is considered a burden and who is a resource? Who is expendable and who is esteemed? Who should engage in the activities that might lead to reproduction and who should not? And if reproduction is not the aim, who can engage in erotic pleasures and who should not?

- How does the discourse on abortion, pre-natal screening, birth control, euthanasia, and medical ethics intersect or otherwise address the eugenics ideology that informs these issues?

- What is the history of values and beliefs regarding human nature, gender and sexuality; American notions of individualism and equality, and the social and legal definitions of what constitutes a minority group? How are these views supported or suborned in a particular text?

## *Key Terms:*

*More than in almost any other field of inquiry, the key terms in Disability Studies are up for grabs. However, I've used the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), endorsed and promoted by the World Health Organization, for most of these definitions.*

**Ableism:** A form of discrimination or social prejudice against people with disabilities. It may also be referred to as "disability discrimination," "physicalism," "handicapism," and "disability oppression." Discrimination faced by those who have or are perceived to have a mental disorder is sometimes called "mentalism" rather than ableism.

**Activity/activity limitations:** Activity is the execution of a task or action by an individual. Activity limitations are difficulties an individual may have in executing activities.

**Body functions/impairments:** Body functions are the physiological functions of body systems (including psychological functions). Impairments are problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss.

**Body structures/impairments:** Body structures are anatomical parts of the body such as organs, limbs, and their components. Impairments are problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss.

**Environmental factors/facilitators/barriers:** Environmental factors make up the physical, social, and attitudinal environment in which people live and conduct their lives. Environmental factors may be a facilitator or a barrier.

**Functioning/disability:** Functioning is the umbrella term encompassing body functions, structures, activities, and participation. Disability is the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.

**Participation/participation restrictions:** Participation is involvement in a life situation. Participation restrictions are problems an individual may experience in involvement in life situations.

**Personal factors:** Personal factors are the particular background of an individual's life and living, and comprise features of the individual that are not part of a health condition or health states, such as: gender, race, age, fitness, lifestyle, habits, coping styles, social background, education, profession, past and current experience, overall behavior pattern, character style, individual psychological assets, and other characteristics, all or any of which may play a role in disability in any level.



Do you still like us?

## Biographical Criticism

This approach "begins with the simple but central insight that literature is written by actual people and that understanding an author's life can help readers more thoroughly comprehend the work." Hence, it often affords a practical method by which readers can better understand a text.

However, a biographical critic must be careful not to take the biographical facts of a writer's life too far in criticizing the works of that writer: the biographical critic "focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author's life…. [B]iographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material."

The advent of modern critical theories led to a rejection of biographical criticism on both philosophical and practical grounds. New Criticism, in particular, with its recognition of the intentional fallacy, pointed out the serious limitations of biographical criticism.

While biographical criticism is now considered to be a relic of the past, it does share several traits with the context-oriented approaches. Like New Historicism, biographical criticism recognizes that all literary works are situated in and spring from specific historical, social, cultural, and biographical contexts. And like all context-oriented approaches, it realizes that the study of a work cannot be limited to only the internal or formal characteristics of that work; any thorough analysis must take multiple contexts into account.

Note: since this methodology has been in disfavor for over a century, we'll forgo the usual explanatory material.



Author: "I chose the color of the curtains randomly. There is no deeper meaning."

Readers:

Riiiiiight
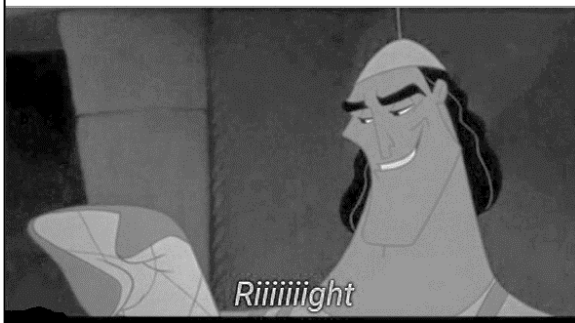
## Psychoanalytic Criticism

The application of specific psychological principles (particularly those of Freud and Lacan) to the study of literature. Psychoanalytic criticism may focus on the writer's psyche, the study of the creative process, the study of psychological types and principles present within works of literature, or the effects of literature upon its readers.

Like psychoanalysis itself, this critical endeavor seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilts, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work. The author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as "symbolism" (the repressed object represented in disguise), "condensation" (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and "displacement" (anxiety located onto another image by means of association).



EGO AND SUPER-EGO WALK INTO A BAR

BARTENDER SAYS, I'M GONNA NEED TO SEE SOME ID

Despite the importance of the author here, psychoanalytic criticism is similar to New Criticism in not concerning itself with "what the author intended." What the author *never* intended (that is, repressed) is sought. The unconscious material has been distorted by the censoring conscious mind.

### *How they think:*

1. Human activity is not reducible to conscious intent. We are not merely rational beings.
2. Both biology and environment have roles in the development of human psychology.
3. Individuals move through developmental stages early in life, and traumas or experiences during that process may have a lasting effect on personality.
4. The psychological makeup of individual producers of art has an impact on literature, art, and other forms of cultural representation.
5. Characters in texts may also have a complex psychology.
6. Literary and other cultural texts may have a psychological impact on readers or meet a psychological need in them.
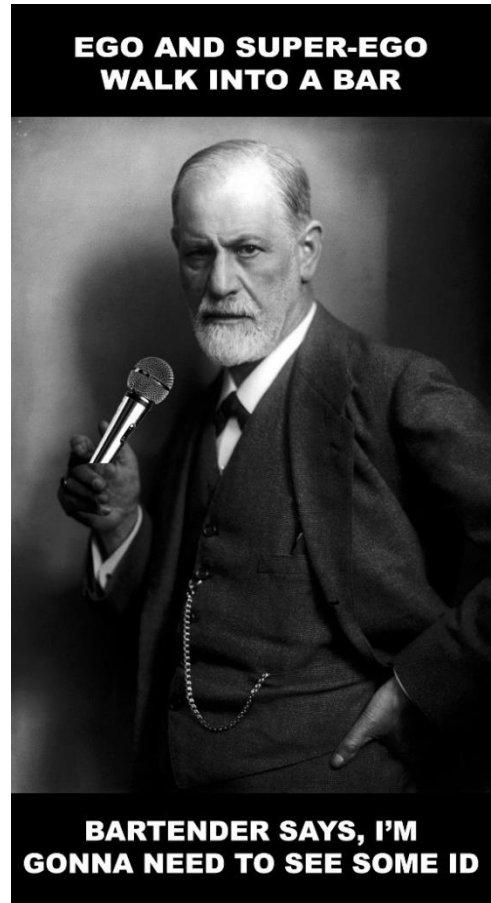
7. It is unlikely that any one theory can ever fully capture the complexity of human psychology and development, which can vary widely across cultures, classes, genders, sexual orientations, and familial and other personal contexts.
8. Thus the literary or cultural critic, like the psychoanalyst, must be very careful to avoid "imposing" meanings on a given story or text.

## What they do:

1. They give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. They associate the literary work's "overt" content with the former, and the "covert" content with the latter, privileging the latter as being what the work is "really" about, and aiming to disentangle the two.

2. Hence, they pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings, whether these be (a) those of the author, or (b) those of the characters depicted in the work.

3. They demonstrate the presence in the literary work of classic psychoanalytic symptoms, conditions, or phases, such as the oral, anal, and phallic stages of emotional and sexual development in infants.

4. They make large-scale applications of psychoanalytic concepts to literary history in general, for example, Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sees the struggle for identity by each generation of poets, under the 'threat' of the greatness of its predecessors, as an enactment of the Oedipus complex.

5. They identify a "psychic" context for the literary work, at the expense of social or historical context, privileging the individual "psycho-drama" above the "social drama" of class conflict. The conflict between generations or siblings, or between competing desires within the same individual looms much larger than conflict between social classes, for instance.

## Questions they ask:

- How do the operations of repression structure or inform the text? What unconscious motives are operating in the main characters; what core issues are thereby illustrated; and how do these core issues structure or inform the text?

- What are the family dynamics present in the text? Is it possible to relate a character's patterns of adult behavior to early experiences in the family as represented in the text? How do these patterns of behavior and family dynamics operate, and what do they reveal?

- How can a character's behavior be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of any kind (e.g., regression, projection, fear of death, sexuality as a primary indicator of psychological identity, or the operations of id, ego, superego?)

## Bonus: What Lacanian Critics do:

1. Like Freudian critics they pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings, but instead of excavating for those of the author or characters, they search out those of the text itself, uncovering contradictory undercurrents of meaning, which lie like a subconscious beneath the "conscious" world of the text. This is another way of defining the process of "deconstruction."

2. They demonstrate the presence in the literary work of Lacanian psychoanalytic symptoms or phases, such as the mirror-stage or the sovereignty of the unconscious.

3. They treat the literary text in terms of a series of broader Lacanian orientations, towards such concepts as lack or desire, for instance.

4. They see the literary text as an enactment or demonstration of Lacanian views about language and the unconscious, particularly the endemic elusiveness of the signified, and the centrality of the unconscious. In practice, this results in favoring the anti-realist text which challenges the conventions of literary representation.

## *Key Terms:*

**Freud's model of the psyche:**

- **Id:** completely unconscious part of the psyche that serves as a storehouse of our desires, wishes, and fears. The id houses the libido, the source of psychosexual energy.

- **Ego:** the mostly-to-partially conscious part of the psyche that processes experiences and operates as a referee or mediator between the id and superego.

- **Superego:** often thought of as one's "conscience"; the superego operates "like an internal censor [encouraging] moral judgments in light of social pressures" (Bressler 123).

**Lacan's model of the psyche:**

- **Imaginary:** a preverbal/verbal stage in which a child (around 6-18 months of age) begins to develop a sense of separateness from her mother as well as other people and objects; however, the child's sense of sense is still incomplete.

- **Symbolic:** the stage marking a child's entrance into language (the ability to understand and generate symbols); in contrast to the imaginary stage, largely focused on the mother, the symbolic stage shifts attention to the father who, in Lacanian theory, represents cultural norms, laws, language, and power (the symbol of power is the phallus—an arguably "gender-neutral" term).

- **Real:** an unattainable stage representing all that a person is not and does not have. Both Lacan and his critics argue whether the real order represents the period before the imaginary order when a child is completely fulfilled—without need or lack—or if the real order follows the symbolic order and represents our "perennial lack" (because we cannot return to the state of wholeness that existed before language).

**Castration:** what boys fear from their fathers, a fear reinforced by the boy's eventual knowledge that women have no penis and are therefore "castrated." Castration anxiety forces the boy to repress his sexual desire for his mother and identify with his father, a formal rival for mother's love, and grow up to smoke a lot of cigars by way of defensive compensation. Castration fear (boys) and penis envy (girl) together make up the "castration complex." Because women feel less intense castration anxiety (being "castrated" already), they develop less of a superego.

**Eros:** one of the two basic sources of all the drives. Eros is the principle of life; it binds together and is most clearly seen in love. Its drives tend to be more plastic and displaceable than those of its opponent, Thanatos, the death drive. Freud saw psychic life as an interplay of these two ever-interpenetrating forces, Life and Death.

**Oedipal Complex:** the boy's tendency, around the age of five, to experience his freshly-awakened sexual strivings toward his mother while wanting to replace his father in her affections. Mostly unconscious. When successfully resolved, these feelings are fully repressed, and the boy, afraid of castration, learns to identify with his father. As a result of this, he internalizes his parents and acquires a superego whose ego ideal replaces some of his early narcissism. The feminine equivalent has been named the Electra Complex, but for Freud, women have inferior superego development and therefore an inferior conscience because they never have to disidentify with mother as boys do. Freud saw an unresolved Oedipal Complex as the cause of every significant neurosis.

**Perversion:** a sexual drive component that fails to come under the dominance of the genital area and its reproductive needs, and instead focuses on some non-reproductive object or aim.

**Pleasure Principle** (long version: the Pleasure-Pain Principle): our most fundamental striving is toward pleasure and away from pain. Pleasure is what we feel when some kind of tension is relieved. Two types: forepleasure (infantile stimulation) and endpleasure (mature satisfaction).

**Reality Principle:** the ego's sense of realistic and rational adaptive expectations. This principle evolves from and governs the heedless hedonism of the Pleasure Principle.

**Repression:** the ego's ridding itself of unacceptable desires and ideas by dumping them into unconsciousness.

**Sublimation:** when a sexual drive is directed into a different aim, like daily work, creativity, piety, etc.

**Thanatos:** the mythic name of the death drive. It represents the organic need to return to lifelessness and stasis, the ultimate calm of lifeless non-conflict. Freud traced all aggressive and destructive activity to this notion.
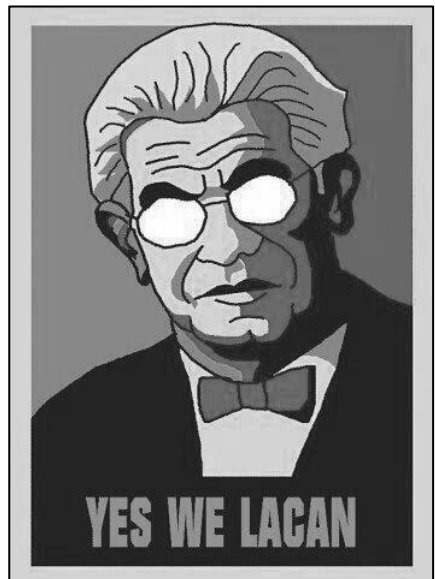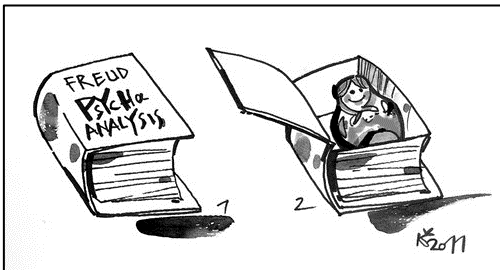
# Reader-Response / Reader-Oriented Criticism

For the initial Reader-Response critics, the idea of a "correct" reading—though difficult to attain—was always the goal of the "educated" reader (armed, of course, with appropriate aesthetic apparatus). For later R-R critics, the reader's ability to understand a text is also subject to a reader's particular "interpretive community."

A reader brings certain assumptions to a text based on the interpretive strategies he or she has learned in a particular interpretive community. The interpretive community serves in some manner to "police" readings, and thus prohibit outlandish interpretations. However, other critics argue that that the reading process is always subjective, a dialectical process between the reader and text. Still others note that a reader's aesthetic experience is always bound by time and historical determinants.

## *How they think:*

1. The "meaning" of a text is not wholly contained in the text.

2. The reading experience may be intensely private and subjective. Carefully and thoroughly investigating the roots of differing, even wildly variant, responses and interpretations can be an important critical exercise.

3. The investigations above may lead to research in psychology, social history, gender studies, or other fields.

4. Texts often presuppose an "ideal" reader, while "real" readers bring their own experiences to the text, including their unique backgrounds, contexts, expectations, and interpretive strategies.

5. As readers proceed through a text, they make choices and engage in interpretive processes that may be traced and analyzed.

6. The success of reader-response analysis depends largely on the sophistication of the critic's meta-theoretical approach to the reading process and the quality of the evidence presented to support any conclusions or generalizations.

## *What they do:*

1. Meaning no longer exists in a "reality out there." It has been relocated to "reality as experienced by the perceiver."

2. While there are a number of forks in this critical path, they all find common ground in taking "the interpretive turn." This move is based on several central ideas:

   - an observer is inevitably a participant in what is observed

   - the receiver of a message is a component of the message

   - information is only information insofar as it is contextualized

- individuals are cultural constructs whose conceptual worlds are composed of a variety of discursive structures, or ways of talking about and imagining the world
- the world of individuals is not only multiple and diverse but is constructed by and through interacting fields of culturally lived symbols, through language in particular
- all cultures are networks of signifying practices
- therefore all interpretation is conditioned by cultural perspective and is mediated by symbols and practice
- texts entail sub-texts, or the often disguised or submerged origins and structuring forces of the messages.

3. They investigate, with varying degrees of scientific rigor, the role the reader plays in "constructing" the meaning of a text.

## *Questions they ask:*

- How does the interaction of text and reader create meaning?
- What does a phrase-by-phrase analysis of a short literary text, or a key portion of a longer text, tell us about the reading experience prestructured by (built into) that text?
- Do the sounds and/or shapes of the words as they appear on the page or how they are spoken by the reader enhance or change the meaning of the word or the text?
- How might we interpret a literary text to show that the reader's response is, or is analogous to, the topic of the story?
- What does the body of criticism published about a literary text suggest about the critics who interpreted that text and/or about the reading experience produced by that text?

## *Key Terms:*

**Horizons of expectations:** A reader's "expectations" or frame of reference is based on that reader's past experience of literature and what preconceived notions about literature the reader possesses (i.e., a reader's aesthetic experience is bound by time and historical determinants). For a work to be considered a classic it needs to exceed a reader's horizons of expectations.

**Implied author:** Distinct from the author and the narrator, the term refers to the character a reader may attribute to an author based on the way a literary work is written, which may differ considerably from the author's true personality.

**Implied reader:** The implied reader is a hypothetical reader of a text who "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect— predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader" (Henderson and Brown).

**Interpretive communities:** Groups of readers who share reading strategies, values and interpretive assumptions.

**Transactional analysis:** Meaning is produced in a transaction of a reader with a text. As an approach, then, the critic would consider "how the reader interprets the text as well as how the text produces a response in her" (Dobie 132).
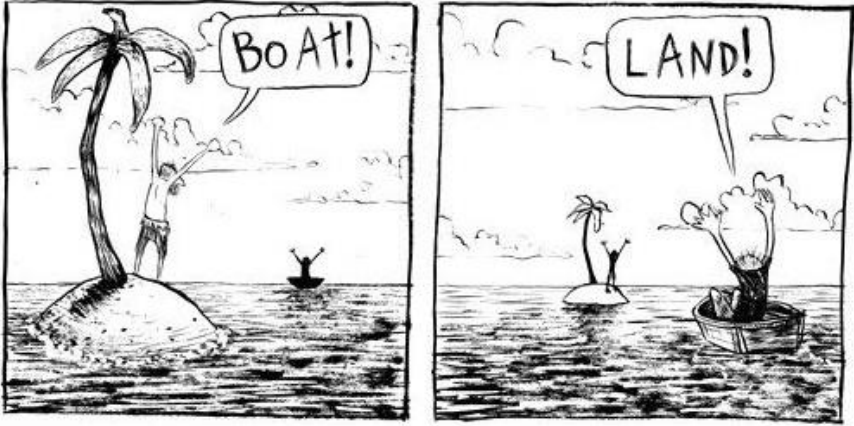
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