* Bring a #2 Pencil and BLUE SCANTRON sheet (from bookstore) for the MID TERM EXAM on Tuesday 6/11/13. ☺
* A question on theories on the exam.

**Critical Approaches to Literature**

Standard critical thinking tools are readily adaptable to the study of literature. It’s possible to analyze, question, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate the literary works you read in the course. Literary criticism is the field of study that systematizes this sort of activity, and several critical approaches to literature are possible. Some of the more popular ones, along with their basic tenants, are listed below.

**Formalist Criticism**

1. Literature is a form of knowledge with intrinsic elements: style, structure, imagery, tone, genre, etc.
2. What gives a literary work status as art, or as a great work of art, is how all of its elements work together to create the reader’s total experience (thought, feeling, gut reactions, etc.)
3. The appreciation of literature as an art requires close reading, a careful, step-by-step analysis and explication of the text (the language of the work). An analysis may follow from questions like, how do various elements work together to shape the effect on the reader?
4. Style and theme influence each other and can’t be separated if meaning is to be retained. It’s this interdependence in form and content that makes a text “literary.” “Extracting” elements in isolation (theme, character, plot, setting, etc.) may destroy a reader’s aesthetic experience of the whole.
5. Formalist critics don’t deny the historical, political situation of a work; they just believe works of art have the power to transcend by being “organic wholes,” akin to a being with life of its own.
6. Formalist criticism is evaluative in that it differentiates great works of art from poor works of art. Other kinds of criticism don’t necessarily concern themselves with this distinction.
7. Formalist criticism is decidedly a “scientific approach to literary analysis, focusing on “facts amenable to verification” (evidence in the text).

**Biographical Criticism**

1. Real life experience can help shape (either directly or indirectly) an author’s work.
2. Understanding an author’s life can help us better understand the work.
3. Facts from the author’s life are used to help the reader better understand the work; the focus is always on the literary work under investigation.

**Historical Criticism**

1. Historical criticism investigates the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it. This investigation includes the author’s biography and the social milieu.
2. Historical criticism often seeks to understand the impact of a work in its day, and it may also explore how meanings change over time.
3. Historical criticism explores how time and place of creation affect meaning in the work.

**Psychological Criticism**

1. These critics hold the belief that great literature truthfully reflects life and is a realistic representation of human motivation and behavior.
2. Psychological critics may choose to focus on the creative process of the artist, the artist’s motivation or behavior, or analyze fictional characters’ motivations and behaviors.

**Mythological Criticism**

1. Mythological criticism studies recurrent universal patterns underlying most literary works (for example, “the hero’s journey”).
2. It combines insights from a variety of academic disciplines: anthropology, psychology, history, comparative religion, etc. It concerns itself with demonstrating how the individual imagination shares a common humanity by identifying common symbols, images, plots, etc.
3. Mythological critics identify “archetypes” (symbols, characters, situations, or images evoking a universal response).

**Marxist (Sociological) Criticism**

1. These critics examine literature in its cultural, economic, and political context; they explore the relation between the artist and the society; how might the profession of authorship have affected what’s been written?
2. It is concerned with the social content of literary works, pursuing such questions as: What cultural, economic or political values does the text implicitly or explicitly promote? What is the role of the audience in shaping what’s been written?
3. Marxist critics assume that all art is political.
4. Marxist critics judge a work’s “ideology,” giving rise to such terms as “political correctness.”

**Reader-Response Criticism**

1. This type of criticism attempts to describe the internal workings of the reader’s mental processes. It recognizes reading as a creative act, a creative process.
2. No text is self-contained, independent of a reader’s interpretive design.
3. The plurality of readings possible is explored. Critics study how different readers see the same text differently, and how religious, cultural, and social values affect readings.
4. Instead of focusing only on the values embedded in the text, this type of criticism studies the values embedded in the reader, Intersections between the two are explored.

**Feminism and Gender Studies**

1. Explores the concepts of “gender” vs. “sex”
2. Both aim to understand the nature of and processes that lead to gender inequality
3. Both identify social roles, experiences, and politics which seem to perpetuate inequality (domestic vs. public sphere, education, sexual objectification, normative sexual ideology, and so forth).