

English 2332: Brit/World Lit.  
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# LITERARY CRITICISM

The paradigms and the possibilities—



▶ **Simplest Theory**

- ▶ Emphasis placed on the author's influence on the writing
- ▶ By examining the author's life, a deeper understanding can be gained regarding his/her writing

BIOGRAPHICAL

- ▶ **A Biographical Reading of “Belle Isle, 1949” by Philip Levine**
  - ▶ Levine grew up in Detroit, MI, the son of immigrants
  - ▶ Working class and immigrant issues played often in his poems
  - ▶ His “Belle Isle” poem is meant to symbolically show the connection between immigrants in a new land despite how different they were. Levine’s immigrant status and fascination with urban life amplify the effectiveness of the poem because his use of details is very specific. He has “insider knowledge.”

BIOGRAPHICAL

- ▶ **The formalist** perspective concentrates on the *form* of the literature itself.
- ▶ “Formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms” (Kennedy 1468).
- ▶ The main question formalists ask is:

What is the structure of the piece?

By **structure**, these critics investigate not only **grammar and syntax** but also literary devices such as **meter and tropes**. The formalistic approach reduces the importance of a text’s historical, biographical, and cultural context but places emphasis on a work’s components.

## FORMALIST CRITICISM- DEFINITION

- ▶ **Another way of explaining it**, the critic examines the literary work in a more scientific process: identifying the elements of the work and how they operate independent of the author.
- ▶ **Formalism** allows the reader to analyze a literary piece with complete objectivity. *However:*

## FORMALIST CRITICISM- DEFINITION

- ▶ The name of the author is not important.
- ▶ The time in which the author lived is not important.
- ▶ Any cultural impact on the author's life is not important.
- ▶ The political beliefs of the author are not important.
- ▶ The actual reader is not important.

*Likewise:*

FORMALIST CRITICISM-  
*WHAT IT IGNORES*

- ▶ Formalists believe that looking at the psychology and biography of the author inform the writing process, but not the composition itself (Kennedy 1469).
- ▶ Formalism does not evaluate or consider the religious, moral, or political value of a piece.
- ▶ Formalism does not evaluate or consider symbolism in a piece. It only mentions that it is there.
- ▶ Formalism strives to force literary or artwork to stand on its own – the author and/or reader are not considered so the piece can be analyzed as a separate, independent entity.

## FORMALIST CRITICISM- *WHAT IT FOCUSES ON*

- ▶ How is the work structured or organized? How does it begin? Where does it go next? How does it end? What is the work's plot? How is its plot related to its structure?
- ▶ What is the relationship of each part of the work to the work as a whole? How are the parts related to one another?
- ▶ Who is narrating or telling what happens in the work? How is the narrator, speaker, or character revealed to readers? How do we come to know and understand this figure?
- ▶ What are the time/place of the work – the setting?
- ▶ What kind of language does the author use to describe, narrate, explain, or otherwise create the world of the literary work?

## FORMALIST CRITICISM- A CHECKLIST

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## FORMALIST CRITICISM- A CHECKLIST

## ▶ **The Goals**

- ▶ Many Gender Critics see a difference between *gender* (which is socially constructed: attitudes and expectations placed on young boys, girls) & *sex* (which is biological determinations).
- ▶ This means that ideas about "typically" masculine or feminine traits and behaviors are products of culture and social conditioning.
- ▶ Gender Critics are interested in how works of literature either *support* or *undermine* the "standards" of masculine/feminine behavior and identity held by the culture in which they were produced.

# GENDER & FEMINIST CRITICISM

- ▶ Originally an offshoot of feminist movements, gender criticism today includes a number of approaches, including the so-called “masculinist” approach recently advocated by poet Robert Bly.
- ▶ The bulk of gender criticism, however, is feminist and takes as a central precept that the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated western thought have resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in literature “full of unexamined ‘male-produced’ assumptions.”

## GENDER & FEMINIST CRITICISM

- ▶ Feminist criticism attempts to correct this imbalance by analyzing and combatting such attitudes—by questioning, for example, why none of the characters in Shakespeare’s play *Othello* ever challenge the right of a husband to murder a wife accused of adultery.
- ▶ Other goals of feminist critics include “analyzing how sexual identity influences the reader of a text” and “examin[ing] how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality.”

## GENDER & FEMINIST CRITICISM

## ► Questions to Consider

1. In what ways is *patriarchy/matriarchy* present in a particular work? How are the effects of patriarchy/matriarchy evident in the lives and attitudes of the characters?
2. Do female/male characters show signs of resistance to patriarchy/matriarchy? If so, how is this resistance portrayed?
3. How are the concerns unique to women/men in a particular place/time portrayed in the work? To what extent does this portrayal *value* those concerns?

# GENDER & FEMINIST CRITICISM