

English 2332: Brit/World Lit.  
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# LITERARY CRITICISM

The paradigms and the possibilities—



- ▶ “Sociological critics argue that literary works should not be isolated from the social contexts in which they are embedded” (DiYanni 1571).
- ▶ “Sociological critics emphasize the ways power relations are played out by varying social forces and institutions” (DiYanni 1571).
- ▶ Sociological critics attempt to analyze literature from one of these two lenses:
  - ▶ Conditions of production, such as schools, magazines, publishers, and fashions.
  - ▶ The applicability of a given work—fiction especially—in studying the dynamics of a given society.

## SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM *DEFINITION*

Sociological critics examine expressions of specific areas in literary works:

- ▶ Economic conditions during which a piece was written
- ▶ Political arena and popular political beliefs
- ▶ Cultural issues

SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM

- ▶ How do dominant elites exploit subordinate groups?
- ▶ How do people become alienated from each other?
- ▶ How do middle-class values cause society to suppress the working class?

(DiYanni 1571).

SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM

1. What social forces and institutions (marriage, racial groups, etc.) are represented in the work? How are these forces portrayed? What is the author's attitude toward them?
2. What political economic elements appear in the work? How important are they in determining or influencing the lives of the characters?
3. To what extent are the lives of the characters influenced or determined by social, political, and economic forces? To what extent are the characters aware of these forces?

## SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Sociological theory is so broad that it can be subdivided in many different categories. Two dominant theories we'll study are

- ▶ Feminist criticism (Gender)
- ▶ Marxist criticism

SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISM

- ▶ Marxist criticism is based on the social and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.
- ▶ Their beliefs include the following:
  - ▶ Value is based on labor.
  - ▶ The working class will eventually overthrow the capitalist middle class—The Worker’s Revolution.
  - ▶ In the meantime, the middle class exploits the working class.
  - ▶ Most institutions—religious, legal, educational, and governmental—are corrupted by middle-class capitalists.

## MARXIST CRITICISM

- ▶ Marxist critics apply these economic and social theories to literature by analyzing:
  - ▶ Ideologies that support the elite and place the working class at a disadvantage
  - ▶ Class conflict
- ▶ Marxism strongly influenced fiction, particularly American fiction, in the 1930s.
- ▶ *Examples:*
  - ▶ Discussing the representation of class struggles in the 1928 novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence
  - ▶ Or the exploration of relationships shown between classes in E. M. Forster's 1914 novel *Maurice*.

## MARXIST CRITICISM



- ▶ Queer Theory stemmed from Feminist Critical Theory during the 1990s.
- ▶ Queer Theory has subsequently come to include the investigation of **all gender and sexual categories and identities**.
- ▶ This theory is **not synonymous with gender theory**, nor even with the overlapping fields of gay and lesbian studies, **but does share many of their concerns** with normative definitions of man, woman, and sexuality. Ultimately, Queer Theory questions the fixed categories of mainstream cultural sexual identity or “normal” sexual ideology

*from ([http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/Eng101\\_QueerDef.pdf](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/Eng101_QueerDef.pdf))*

## QUEER THEORY DEFINITION

- ▶ According to the introduction to “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” by De Lauretis, the term “queer” enjoys an advantage over term “gay” while implying minority gender and sexual identity. But at the same time, it also avoids the assumption of “gay” as an associated term with “white male”.
- ▶ This theory explores the issues like sexuality, marginalization of women and other population, and power inequality in the society as well as the culture.
- ▶ The goal of this theory is to change the [...] social norms about the sexuality including the exploration of the root cause of the creation and development of those norms in the society.
- ▶ Queer theory largely focuses on the differences between the gender, sex and desire.

*from (<https://www.aresearchguide.com/the-queer-theory.html>)*

## QUEER THEORY

- ▶ Why does Victor Frankenstein wish to create a “beautiful” man instead of a “beautiful” woman?
- ▶ Why are so many antagonists, male *and* female, almost always unmarried and single?  
(Humbaba, Grendel, The Minotaur, The Joker)
- ▶ If Peter Pan was really a boy, why does a grown woman usually play him on stage?
- ▶ Consider how Walt Whitman, America’s Poet and a lifelong bachelor, writes of his love of men. Queer theory asks: is this a friendship kind of romantic love or some early type of bromance?

*from* (<https://www.shmoop.com/queer-theory/>)

## QUEER THEORY EXAMPLES